

CONNER'S PERPETUAL MOTION MACHINES

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At one point or another, many of us have been stumped by the Zen koan that ends with the question, “what is the sound of one hand clapping?” The purpose of this perplexing question is to provoke us into thinking outside of the familiarity of our habits, to make an imaginative leap and achieve *satori*, a state of enlightenment. It is as challenging to answer this koan as it is to answer the question, who is Bruce Conner? In 1959, he had an exhibition, *Works by the Late Bruce Conner*, at Spatsa Gallery, San Francisco. In 1971, he subverted the viewers' assumptions about authorship by titling his exhibition *The Dennis Hopper One Man Show, Volume 1* at Reese Palley Gallery, San Francisco. After he “retired” in 1999, other artists have appeared, including Emily Feather and Diogenes Lucero, both of whom sign their works, have their own styles and biographies. A heteronymic artist, capturing Conner is like trying to lasso a beam of sunlight. He eludes us by remaining right where he is.

Conner first began exhibiting in the mid 1950s, and, since then, he has become enormously influential as well as completely inimitable. Formally meticulous and decidedly innovative, he has broken new ground in virtually every medium he has ever worked: painting, drawing, film, collage, prints, light shows, music, dance, photography, photograms, sculpture, assemblage, tapestry, and performance. His visual lexicon ranges

from the juxtaposition of disjunctive images to extremely concentrated abstractions; from found materials to invented forms. Even the polymorphic Picasso didn't explore nearly as many different mediums as Conner has over the course of his career. In a recent conversation with the artist Philip Taaffe, he pointed out that Conner is the one postwar artist for whom the appellation "Renaissance Man" actually fits.

Rejecting the ideals associated with style, Conner creates distinct bodies of work in different mediums, and then goes on to discover a new territory which he quickly and decisively makes all his own. In whatever medium he chooses to work, he has repeatedly demonstrated an astonishing ability to seamlessly synthesize formal issues with his own values and concerns. His diverse, multifaceted oeuvre stands as one of the unparalleled achievements in postwar art history.

Possessed by an intellect that is restless and resourceful, Conner is committed to not repeat himself. It is within that context that we should see this group of about one hundred offset lithographs published in 1970 and 1971. They range from small single sheets to suites of seven prints to a book of fifteen prints (BOOK ONE), counterfeit currency (MONEY HONEY) and a set of twenty-five cards that is a collaboration with the poet Michael McClure, (CARDS). Largely unknown until now, this marvelously varied, scrupulously conceived body of work adds to our current understanding of the artist's lifelong preoccupations. As he himself stated:

"All of the lithographs were originally made as drawings with felt tip pen on paper. The pens used were Pentel and Flair watercolor pens, as well as the so-called "Permanent" felt tip marker pens. I was aware that the permanence of the ink had not been researched and archival information was not available. It was assumed that the watercolor inks would be comparable to current watercolor media in regards to fading or color change in artificial and direct light. In at least two instances, I gave a "Permanent" marker drawing

as a gift along with instructions to place it in direct sunlight, which would cause it to fade until it became a blank sheet of paper. The originals were framed using UF-3 Ultraviolet Filtering Plastic glazing. The series of lithographs were initiated as a means of documenting and preserving the images of the drawings should they prove to be light fugitive. They were also a means of reaching a larger audience by way of multiples.”¹

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A relatively new, widely available and inexpensive commercial product, the watercolor felt-tip pen, enabled Conner in the 1960s to thoroughly investigate the graphic mark, and all the issues attending to it: the relationship between the figure and ground, light and dark, geometric and the retinal, deliberateness and chaos. He makes us rethink any assumptions we might have about the nature of both drawing and mastery. While his skill is immediately evident, it is executed with an instrument that had never been associated with either mastery or the artist’s hand. As used by Conner, the unique qualities of the watercolor felt tip pen are: immediacy and irrevocability.

Conner appears to have never allowed the felt-tip pen to cross a pre-existing line or shape within all the drawings. Each mark has its own boundary. It is not surprising to learn that he titled one of his 1965 watercolor felt-tip pen drawing, MAZE DRAWING. The drawings are obsessively incremental, the result of working very long hours at a time. It is worth remembering that, for at least part of the time that he was working on these drawings, he was also working on light shows at the Avalon Ballroom. While both of these sequential activities demand a very different kind of attention, both require the artist to respond to the action or mark that preceded it. Finally, Conner seems to have

¹ Fax from Bruce Conner to the author, dated 7/10/04

been the only artist to recognize that these two disparate mediums are connected by an underlying affinity, light.

In contrast to pen and ink, the felt tip pen didn't have to be replenished and thereby interrupt the working process. Conner had found a tool that enabled him to concentrate exclusively on the procedure, to focus solely on the drawing as it emerged on the paper. Drawing became a process of sustained improvisation, where he could push himself even further than he had in 23 KENWOOD AVENUE, 1963, the *tour de force* drawing whose dense, maze-like weave of lines and morphing patterns anticipate the watercolor felt tip pen drawings.

The fundamental question that Conner addresses in the drawings is how to draw something and nothing at the same time. Could drawing be freed, as painting had already been, from the burden of representation and description? Conner found that both the felt-tip pen and marker enabled him to free the mark from any descriptive function. By transforming a central issue of abstraction into a domain that is unmistakably his, the artist re-envisioned Jackson Pollock's historic achievement in a way that breaks new ground. For like Pollock who, in pouring his medium onto a flat surface, simultaneously ruptured the traditional means of painting and made paint remain paint, Conner's use of these commercial instruments challenges accepted definitions of drawing. If anything, the felt-tip pen and marker drawings are hybrids that resist categorization.

In discussing the compositional process inherent to the drawings, Conner pointed out:

“If you have a container everything is formal within the container if you define the limitations for it. I feel that the activity inside those drawings is as chaotic and as

controlled as any of the assemblages or sculptures or movies or other works that I've been involved in. When I work on the drawings they aren't finished drawings. They are changing all the time. The drawing is a new drawing with every line and mark I made."²

And, in speaking of the recurring use of the Mandala, which functions in many of the drawings and prints as a visible container or structuring device, Conner stated:

"I probably made the first drawing like that when I was in high school. I was taking Plane Geometry class. We were assigned to have a project for the semester independent of any assignment. What I chose as my project was to draw a circle with twenty-four points around the circumference and then draw a line from each point to all the other twenty-three, creating a pattern of lines. It was exasperating and tiresome. Going through those changes bit by bit had something to do with the Mandalas that I was involved in later."³

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The offset lithographs have their origins in Conner's felt-tip pen drawings created roughly between 1964-1970. These prints can be distinguished by having been printed in either one or two colors. One group has been inked once in black ink and printed on white paper. The other group consists of two colors, printed black on brown ink, on white paper. Within this latter group Conner used half-tone reproduction to get the print to correspond to the way the ink melded into the paper when he used a "Permanent" marker.⁴ Most of the prints are untitled. In certain cases the artist uses generic titles (MANDALA, TRIPTYCH, BOOK ONE, CARDS) to name their formal containers.

See Karlstrom interview

³ See Karlstrom Interview

⁴ See Untitled, Catalog Nos. 701-707

The first lithograph made in this group, #100, was done at Collectors Press, San Francisco. The artist was dissatisfied with the edition as the density of line and overall tone varied from print to print because of the manual overlapping of the ink by the ink roller.⁵ It was imperative that he supervise the entire production of the prints and, after extensive research, he chose Kaiser Graphics, a commercial printing house in Oakland. Except for the print done at Collectors Press, Conner oversaw from start to finish the printing of all of the offset lithographs at Kaiser Graphics. He had found a way to make the lithographs perfectly replicate the graphic marks of the drawings, which leads one to think that he did not want the viewer to distinguish between the drawings and the prints. This isn't altogether surprising, given his use of heteronyms and questioning of authorship. Still, he found it necessary to destroy part or all of some editions, because they didn't fulfill his standard of perfection. He also hand trimmed some of the editions to make them directly correspond to the original drawings.

Each lithographic image is not necessarily identical to its "original," earlier drawing. For example, #117 is made up of the felt tip pen drawing plus certain elements of the same drawing that Conner altered by collage before the lithograph was printed. #121 is a unique print made up of a collage from parts of MANDALA #120 and #115.

(ADD PARAGRAPH ON UNTITLED #123--SEE B.C.)

⁵ In a note Conner faxed on 7/10/04 to the author, the artist stated: "The print was made at Collectors Press, San Francisco. The numbering of the prints was done before the entire edition was completely printed. Technical defects on some prints required that some of the copies be destroyed. Only 41 copies are extant. A metal litho plate was made photographically in high contrast and inked by hand rolled ink. Overlapped inking by the roller caused the defects of the prints. The density of the line and over all tone was altered by the extra ink applied so that each print had to be judged for its compositional character. A total of 145 prints were pulled but only 41 were actually signed for the

Conner worked on many of the drawings from the top, bottom, and/or sides simultaneously. Pages 3 and 4 of BOOK ONE were deliberately printed upside-down in contrast to the orientation of the original framed drawings. They are facing pages from an actual book that were drawn upon upside-down or right side up. He initially conceived of the drawings in the book to be printed in a bound volume that would have no title, no words, and no instructions to indicate which was the top or bottom. The drawings would fill each and every page from border to border, including the cover. This initial concept was not completed but it influenced the character of the prints in BOOK ONE.

[#601 is printed larger than the original drawing. In addition, the twenty-five mandalas in CARDS are taken directly from those in #601. Both works are printed in two colors, black on brown. This suggests that the prints became a further source of creativity, enabling Conner to move into a new territory and track a different logic.]--
rewrite

On the other side of the cards four words have been printed, each aligned with an edge of the card. No matter where one starts reading the words by Michael McClure—SWART WHEEL MEMORY STREAMING or MEMORY STREAMING SWART WHEEL—a new meaning emerges. Echoing the round Mandala on the card's obverse side, language becomes circular, dependent upon itself rather than describing the world.

At the same time, and in contradiction to this manner of reading the cards, they can also be shuffled and spread out on a table. This recreates McClure's method of selecting one hundred words at random to go on the cards. Reminiscent of the tarot, the cards can be read linearly in any direction. One could choose to read only the words on

edition. The edition number remained at 50 because the prints were signed as they were

the top edge, or read them circularly, diagonally, vertically, or from bottom to top. . By mirroring the character of the Mandalas on the obverse side, language has been set into perpetual motion. There is immense freedom in this type of versatility. Thus, CARDS is the result of careful consideration on both a conceptual and practical level.

The various marks in the lithographs range from irregular dots to a field of interlocking lines, ragged shapes, and forms that resemble wood grain, geological formations, and jigsaw puzzles. In # 702, (illustrate #702 here) the white seems to surround the central black shape like light emanating from behind an eclipsed sun. This is a permanent chain reaction, where the shape and direction of every mark influences the shape and direction of the surrounding ones. The relentless interplay between the white unmarked space and black marks can be likened to a maze that can be entered at any point and which has no center.

When their size increases, the white spaces can more easily be read as shapes. The prints' ceaselessly changing surfaces invite the viewer to begin looking anywhere, to scrutinize their variegated forms and jostling lines like a scientist gazing through a microscope. Looking is equated with both enormous attentiveness and wandering. The experience becomes an unpredictable series of sequences that are seen as both aimless and determined.

The use of a circle that is often (but not always) indicated by a white band of unmarked paper is one of the ways that Conner structures his continuously shifting fields. He uses both concentric circles and other containing structures to separate as well as juxtapose

approved and it was assumed that the goal of 50 acceptable prints would be reached.”

two or more different patterns. In #126, one of a number of geometric compositions, Conner has a series of concentric squares bordered on all four sides by triangles. These structures add to the complexity of the offset lithographs, as well as further distinguish them from each other. It is also distinguished from the original drawing, UNTITLED, September 31, 1966, by virtue of the fact the artist rotated it clockwise one turn, so that the lithograph's bottom edge corresponds to the drawing's left edge.

In #125, which is made up of patterns but no geometric structure, Conner signed the print in two places, underscoring that it could be rotated. This implies that ideally the print should be placed on a flat surface, which is how the original drawing was done. In fact, Bruce Conner suggested to a gallery in the late 1970s that it display his series of prints #601-606 lying flat on a sculptural pedestal. By connecting the presentation of the print to the fact that he worked on the original drawing from all sides, Conner “corrects” Pollock who worked on the floor from all sides but mounted the paintings in one orientation on the wall. In contrast to the sequestered status it art historically occupies, UNTITLED LITHOGRAPH #125 invites a level of intimacy not normally associated with prints.

On a structural level, Conner's use of a linear geometric form—the negative space of the drawing—enables him to establish clearly defined areas. However, the artist doesn't always rely on discrete areas of white paper to separate the fields of marks. In many cases, one area of more-or-less similar marks appears to morph into a different pattern; or, recalling visionary states, the graphic marks seem to continually reconfigure themselves. One becomes ever more conscious of wandering during the act of looking.

The prints define a world in ceaseless flux. Impossible to comprehend in one glance, they compel us to repeatedly adjust and refocus our attention. We are asked to do the impossible: to pay attention to everything while the best we can do is be attentive to merely a portion of these complex visual structures. Conner subverts the formalist ideal of engaging a work all at once, as exemplified by Frank Stella's monochrome paintings, by defining the act of looking as something that is limited *and* continually shifting. Further, in contrast to the layering encountered in Pollock's poured paintings and the compression of printed matter and encaustic by Jasper Johns, these prints do not need to rely on tangible density to persistently alter our attention.

Echoing Heraclitus' dictum about the forever changing state of nature, Conner's drawings seem as if they are animated by a life force, their surfaces swarming with entities. The relationship is never hierarchical between the areas marked by drawing and the ones that aren't. As soon as we discern that the unmarked area is delineating the marks, our perception changes and negative space becomes active. This constant retinal play is a scientific phenomenon known as "persistence of vision." About this phenomenon, Conner has stated:

"The motion picture has twenty-four different pictures in a second. In between each of them, the screen is black. And by retaining that image from one picture to another, your eye experiences the illusion of motion, whereas it is in actuality a series of still photographs. It has a stroboscopic effect. The stroboscope creates patterns and colors by interference with the brain waves. Whenever you look at any black-and-white or almost any contrasting image, a certain amount of that impression is kept in the retina of the eyeball. Look at a bright light and look away, and you see the negative

image of it. So, as almost an analogy with photography, the eye is continually registering images, both positive and negative.”⁶

While Conner is talking about film and photography, it is clear that he put his knowledge of this scientific phenomenon into the drawings and prints. Various means are used to create the illusion of motion, among them: shifting, rhythmic fields of dense, abstract patterning; the interplay between positive and negative; and the use of white to generate a stroboscopic-like effect. The retinal afterimage, that is the result of the fast changing contrast between black-and-white, causes the image to appear to be moving--an effect that is both compelling and disconcerting.

Both the felt tip pen drawings and offset lithographs dissolve the figure/ground relationship, as well as become an unending engagement between black and white, darkness and light. Like Gnostic charts, many of the ones incorporating a Mandala can be read as hermetic maps of the universe. They bring to mind the illustrations one finds in *Utriusque Cosmi, Volume 1* (1617) by Robert Fludd (1574-1638). Fludd presented sixteen Mandala-like structures, circles within circles, each of which detailed a stage of Genesis. Deeply knowledgeable about many arcane branches of philosophical speculation, the artist is able to evoke these associations by underscoring the formal relation of the graphic mark to its surrounding space. We see both formally rigorous drawing and an engagement between light and dark, and all the associations their encounter evokes. It is not the literal symbolism that he is necessarily interested in, but the relationship between a structure and its surroundings, form and chaos.

⁶ Bruce Conner, interview with Peter Boswell, February 11, 1986, in *2000 BC: THE BRUCE CONNER STORY PART II* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), P. 54.

The source of the offset lithograph TRIPTYCH # 122 (illustrate #122) is a 1964 drawing that consists of three separate drawings framed together as a set. By printing all three rectangles on single sheet, TRIPTYCH preserves the relationship of the drawing's three narrow vertical rectangles. In the central rectangle, there are three barely discernible Mandalas comprised of three concentric circles. In the outer ring of the top circle are four smaller circles, located at the top, bottom, and midpoints of both sides. The middle Mandala contains no smaller circles, while on the bottom Mandala there are two smaller circles located on the sides of the outer, midway between the top and bottom and exactly opposite each other.

The placement of the smaller circles in the bottom Mandala implies that all of them can be rotated, that their position isn't fixed like planets in the solar system. Placed between two vertical rectangles in which there are no discernible structures, this choreographed movement causes the viewer's attention to shift between static structure and polymorphous form. We move from making connections between the circular shapes to becoming lost in the patterns in the outside rectangles, not to mention those inside and outside the concentric circles. The patterns in the other vertical outer rectangles seem ready to coalesce into fixed forms, but never do. They exist so perfectly between emergence and dissolution that we begin to doubt what we see.

Is a form about to become apparent or is it one's imagination? We shift further between seeing and remembering, for the three Mandalas evoke the Holy Trinity, the head, body, and feet of Jesus Christ, and various alchemical and mystical diagrams, including the Kabbalah's *otz chiim*, tree of life. The print TRIPTYCH makes us

hyperconscious of the fact that seeing and thinking is an interrelated process that varies and modifies. TRIPTYCH induces us to begin to see ourselves in the act of seeing, to become, in that regard, disembodied. We are experiencing something akin to a visionary state. This is why Conner's work is so engaging and disarming. Whereas op art locates vision purely in the eyes, the retinal nature of UNTITLED LITHOGRAPHS 1970-1971 make us more aware of how looking and thinking may deceive each other. Conner's prints are a profound examination of the nature of faith, of what it might mean to believe in that which exceeds perception.

In MANDALA # 120, (illustrate #120) Conner structures the act of seeing in a very different way. A large Mandala in which there are large areas of white, as well as a series of smaller concentric circles, occupies the center of this vertical rectangle. Along the top of the lithograph there are three Mandalas, each with small concentric circles, while along the bottom there are four Mandalas, each with concentric circles. The bottom Mandala on the far right contains no pattern; it is a hole of light or emptiness. Meanwhile, in the central Mandala, the concentric circles imply a spatiality that is reinforced by the jagged, unmarked white lines extending from its circumferences, like cosmic lightning.

The horizontal rows along the top and bottom may induce us to read the print sequentially, to take particular notice of how much pattern, as well as what kind, each of them contains. At the same time, we wonder why the last mandala on the bottom row contains no pattern? There seems to be an underlying but elusive logic to the print. It is a vision of a world in conflict and flux. Despite its physicality, the print seems to be transparent, like a strip of film through which light passes. It is as if Conner has transformed the print into a film with no beginning or ending, a light show without light.

Like miners panning for gold we can scrutinize every detail of the offset lithographs. Shifting between aimless looking and intense scrutiny, we observe a variety of forceful experiences, including extreme retinal pleasure and terror (?). Later, after we stop looking, we feel intensely charged. And perhaps, if we can remain open to the experience, changed in some subtle way.