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Who was the real Bruce Conner?

by [Kevin Hatch](#) | 30 June 16

The title of the exhibition Bruce Conner: It's All True, organised by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, comes from a letter the artist wrote, late in life, in which he listed 61 labels the media had attached to him and his work. These included "artist" and "anti-artist", "feminist" and "misogynist", "spiritual" and "profane", "accessible" and "obscure", "realist" and "surrealist".



"It's all true," Conner concluded. This welter of contradictions hints at why his work has been so difficult to assimilate into the prevailing narratives of post-war American art. Now SFMoMA and MoMA are placing considerable institutional resources behind an effort to size Conner up. One of the chief pleasures of this show, which will include around 250 works of art from across his career, will be the opportunity to observe how the curators have negotiated the artist's many well-laid traps as they attempt to settle him into art history.

Not really dead

Conner (1933-2008) began laying traps early in his 50-year career, which began in earnest with his move from Wichita to San Francisco in 1957 at the age of 24. One of his earliest strategies was to mask his identity as an artist, thereby seemingly damaging his opportunity for success. There was, for example, his 1960 exhibition *Works by the Late Bruce Conner*, which was preceded by an invitation card that looked like a death announcement. Conner later claimed that Al Frankenstein, then the critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, got angry when he found out the artist "wasn't really dead like he promised".

For an exhibition of etchings based on collages pieced together from anonymous 19th-century engravings, Conner stole the identity of his friend, the actor Dennis Hopper, and presented his own work as "by" Hopper. Hopper, the film star and photographer who was a lifelong supporter of the artist, was unaware of the scheme. Ultimately Conner's gallery balked; they were concerned with such pragmatics as who would be paid if the works were to sell. But the suite of engravings is still known as *THE DENNIS HOPPER ONE-MAN SHOW* (1971-73).

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Even as late as 2000, he continued to toy with who and what "Bruce Conner" might be. When delicate inkblot drawings—uncannily similar to those that Conner had begun making in the 1970s, but attributed to fanciful names like Diogenes Lucero, Emily Feather and Anonymouse—began to appear in "group" shows alongside Conner's own work, most assumed they were by him. When pressed, Conner was steadfast: in an interview with the poet John Yau he said: "These are associates of mine. They are not personae. They are true entities."

Thus did Conner resist being pinned down as any one true entity. Yet his work could be, at the same time, fiercely personal. He eschewed both the cool irony of Pop and the obdurate muteness of Minimalism with an earnestness sometimes obscured by his gallows humour. His early assemblages, made up of detritus gathered from the junk shops and streets of San Francisco and lashed together with women's nylons, often trafficked in the blackest of comedy, and were just as often misunderstood in their time. CHILD (1959-60), a misshapen but sensitively moulded black-wax figure lashed to a child's high chair, prompted an outcry when shown at the De Young Museum in San Francisco in 1960. "It's Not Murder—It's Art," ran one newspaper headline. Conner was nonplussed at the reception, but kept the work in a cupboard at home, hinting at his sensitivity to his most brutal visions.

Treacherous beauty

Other works by Conner remain difficult to look at because the grotesque evils they contain are enveloped in treacherous beauty. Such is the case with CROSSROADS (1976), the film that is recognised by many as his masterpiece in the medium, in which declassified US Navy footage of two hydrogen bomb tests unfolds in slow motion for 36 minutes. As a statement on the seductive power of cataclysmic destruction, the film has lost none of its relevance or potency.

This career survey of Conner's work is a signal moment, not only in the mounting recognition of the artist but also in the ongoing effort on the part of museums and scholars to expand the frame of post-war American art beyond its familiar borders. In this case, it will afford an opportunity for a singular artist to come into focus in all his multiplicity.