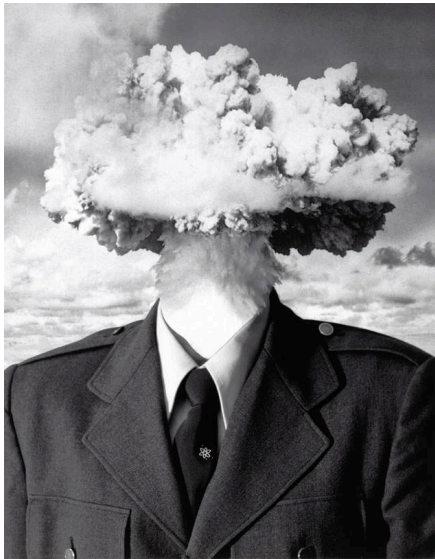


Beta, Andy. "Bruce Conner's 'Time Bombs' Hit MoMA," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 June 2016.

Bruce Conner's 'Time Bombs' Hit MoMA

Curators, friends and fellow artists reflect on the artist's work in advance of MoMA's retrospective

By **ANDY BETA**



When Bruce Conner died in 2008, it wasn't the first time.

In 1960, the artist staged his own death in his first solo show, titled "The Work of the Late Bruce Conner." By 1970, he had also convinced "Who's Who in American Art" directory that he was deceased.

When "Bruce Conner: It's All True," the Museum of Modern Art's massive career retrospective, opens Sunday, it will show the San Francisco-based artist in a state of constant rebirth. One of the most restless artistic minds of the postwar American scene, he experimented endlessly, producing abstract films and found-art assemblages, intricate

felt-pen and blobby inkblot drawings, punk-scene photos and playful performances.

"When he had a retrospective at [the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles], every room looked like a different artist," said Toni Basil, a choreographer, dancer and longtime friend. "You couldn't believe it was all Bruce."

His works could be dark meditations on the atomic age or social-justice issues, or could simply revel in playing with color, light, music and movement.

Throughout his career, he worked to keep his art from being pigeonholed or treated as precious. He embraced materials that decayed or disappeared and more than once tossed work off the side of the Staten Island ferry.

He had "a fascination and repulsion with his identity as an artist," said Laura Hoptman, one of the curators of the show. "He was reticent to even sign his early works."

In advance of "It's All True," we asked artists, friends, musicians and curators to talk about some specific Conner works. Below, edited excerpts:

'Child' (1959), a haunting assemblage-type sculpture of a wax child in a high chair wrapped in nylon

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Laura Hoptman, curator: "Conner started out as a painter, but even these were always dimensional. He fooled around with different materials. 'Child' belongs to the beginnings of Conner's experimentation with sculpture.

'Child' was made during a period right before the execution of a thief and rapist named Caryl Chessman, who drew the death penalty even though he wasn't a murderer. Conner used the piece in protest to the death penalty and it brought Conner national attention."

'23 Kenwood Avenue' (1963), *a detailed abstract ink-on-paper drawing*

Laura Hoptman, curator: "Bruce built a little bit of a time bomb in each one of his works. He was fascinated but also conflicted with the notion that his work would disappear one day. The drawings with felt-tip pens, very soon after he made them, he could see them fading. They turn purple, then brown and then they disappear. It was something he embraced: Some of the works he gifted to friends, he told them to put the drawings in the light, so that they would disappear."

'Breakaway' (1966), *a kinetic 5-minute proto-music video*

Toni Basil, choreographer, musician, actress: "We were friends and Bruce asked if he could make a film of me. He didn't tell me anything to do at all. I prepared wardrobe and all the tights with holes in them. I cut them myself and made the flower garland around my head. And then I just improvised a dance.

Bruce then used my first single 'Breakaway' as the soundtrack. Certainly 'Breakaway' was the first short film to a song that turned out to be what MTV became."

Dara Birnbaum, visual artist: "It's hard to find better inspiration than 'Breakaway.' It's more than film: it's like breathing with a camera. When you see the film it's phantasmagoric, it gives a feeling of the camera dancing with Toni Basil, almost as if you're having an intimate relationship with her."

'Sound of One Hand Angel' (1974), *a self-portrait on light-sensitive photo paper*

Geoff Muldaur, folk musician: "Bruce and I met in college. We didn't talk about art, but every iteration of his art I would keep an eye on. The beautiful light things on gelatin silver prints [done in collaboration with photographer Edmund Shea]...the vertical self-portrait photos...the human shapes, that's just one of the things that came up in his wonderful career. I never saw an iteration I didn't like. They were all so elegant."

'Bombhead' (2002), *a collage of a seeming self-portrait, the head replaced with a mushroom cloud*

Christian Marclay, visual artist and composer: "He sought beauty in what was ugly and dark, in trash and rotting garbage, even finding poetry in the horror of an atomic

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explosion. Preferring the backstage to the spotlight, he hid in whatever peripheral shadows would be cast by the art world, as in this collage—which is like a magic trick, his face gone up in smoke."