

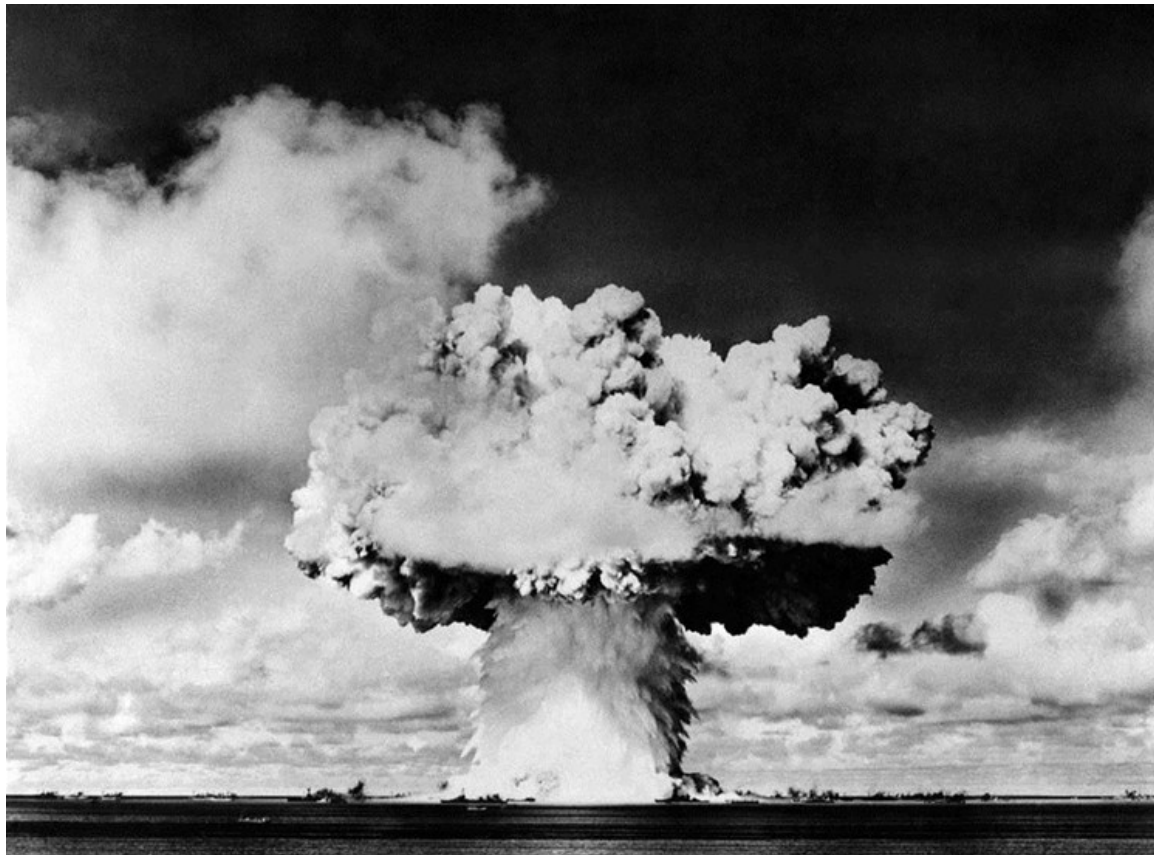
Haslett, Tobi. "A Man Swallows the World: Bruce Conner's Jumbled Truth Rages On at MoMA," *The Village Voice*, 19 July, 2016.

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A Man Swallows the World: Bruce Conner's Jumbled Truth Rages On at MoMA

BY TOBI HASLETT

TUESDAY, JULY 19, 2016 AT 7 A.M.



Still from *CROSSROADS* (1976) Courtesy Conner Family Trust

Bruce Conner, that cheerful iconoclast of postwar American art, was also its greatest glutton. The current retrospective at MoMA is a shrine to his appetite. All the fatty morsels of American culture — our sexual hangups and our dances with death, the people and packages we swap and sell and pulp and discard — are here mashed and swallowed, warped into aesthetic objects by the fizzing metabolism of Conner's sensibility. An event or concept will be fed to him (nuclear apocalypse,

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the Kennedy assassination, punk) only to be fused with everything else into a lump of jumbled form. Little surprise that he was an early champion of assemblage and found-footage film: They bespeak a compulsion to consume, to masticate, to be nourished and replenished by the sheer mass of *things* that clog our sensorium. His was an aesthetics of digestion: art as gut.

I knew of him, mainly, for his films. *A MOVIE* (1958) opens the exhibition, as it should. Conner's first attempt at cinema, it was a bugle call for the genre of found-footage film (a genre to which *REPORT* (1963–67), a deconstruction of the Kennedy assassination, is perhaps his most jarring and noted contribution). But that first film makes a bold wager: What if all the flashing pictures of American life could be stapled together? What if B-movie cowboys could be slotted in with ethnographic film and old newsreels, those sundry particles of visual culture whose only common quality is that they move?

Sometimes the music is dainty woodwinds, sometimes pompous brass; in each case, the soundtrack locks Conner's clips into place, where they butt up against cinematic cliché. Juxtapositions tickle and provoke — or they undo themselves, becoming dialectical montages whirling out of joint. A stomping elephant finds its echo in galloping Indians. A mushroom cloud rises slowly out of the sea, an ashen bloom of annihilating grandeur, but the scene is cut short by a clip of a surfer wiping out, and then another, and then another. There's a wicked little rhyme here — the froth of a wave meets the blast of the bomb — but this is no flippant symmetry or snickering deflation. *A MOVIE* tests the limits of the film form: Reality isn't dissolved by the moving image, but seems to congeal around it. As jagged fragments of the culture (water skiers, canoers, a woman peeling off her nylons) are laid alongside a vision of man-made Armageddon, our task becomes clear: how to order, or even apprehend, precisely the world we might so haughtily destroy?

Much of Conner's work seems to ricochet between those two poles: the shattered piles of actuality and a vision of the End. *CROSSROADS* (1976) is an awed, solemn film, composed of footage of the American government's infamous nuclear bomb tests carried out at Bikini Atoll beginning in 1946. The climbing smoke here has a balletic elegance. It seems, in fact, a bit abstract, banishing everything but its own doleful, looming form. The mushroom cloud as symbol, as concept, or even (in that century of gleaming capitalist accumulation) as logo.

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RATBASTARD (1958), Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis/gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997

There were other mushrooms, of course. Conner will always be considered a San Francisco artist — at a nose-thumbing distance from the pomp and protocol of New York. Psychedelia, the Beats, a certain breed of goofy Orientalism: All our caricatures of California seem to converge on this odd, blond man. Never mind that he came from Kansas or had close ties with members of the New York avant-garde (like the poet Lionel Ziprin and the artist Harry Smith). I imagine him as something of a trickster deity, springing up naughtily to announce his own death (which he did) or to scour the phonebook for people named Bruce Conner (which he also did) or to paint the word "LOVE" in the middle of the street. (See the photograph *LOVE OAK* (2004), a documentation of that last work.)

But the pieces never float into a hippie-inflected airiness or recline into some loftily empty pose: The work was always too cluttered with the stuff of experience, with the rough and sensuous textures of material life. Even ink drawings of his *MANDALA SERIES* from the mid-1960s, five of which hang in this exhibition, relinquish all claim to transcendence and the smugly

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misinterpreted "wisdom of the East" that came to characterize that decade and locale: These are dense, belabored visual confections, the result of an intricate and industrious temperament that nevertheless dared to dream of unities, of cosmic principles.

This is perhaps the ethos of the assemblages: a sense that life is lived at a point of insoluble climax and inane collision. Brokenness cannot be denied — nor must it be accepted. Creating is an act of joking reconciliation, of mixing incongruous parts. Conner began to stick things together — tar, feathers, metal, women's nylons — when he grew frustrated with his paintings and, in a moment of private rebellion, started jamming objects in or onto the canvas. *RATBASTARD* (1958), one of his early assemblages, is made of wood, canvas, fabric, newspaper, and oil, among other things — a brave new approach, though the piece has the paradoxical quality of looking like it was unearthed from a crypt.

"It's All True" is the name of this exhibition, and the phrase is Conner's own. In a letter to a friend, he once rattled off a long list of attributes taken from the press about him: He was, apparently, "an artist, an anti-artist," "subtle, confrontational," "accessible, obscure," with work that was "beautiful, horrible" as well as "avant-garde, historical." The litany ends with Conner's peevish confession: "It's all true."

I thought of this as I watched his *THREE SCREEN RAY* (2006), a three-channel reprise of his iconic found-footage film *COSMIC RAY*, from 1962. Both the original and this latest version are bursting, pulsing visual events. Clips of nude women, scenes from combat, joyous crowds, and (of course) the inevitable mushroom cloud snap onto the screen, all to the raggedly lovely call-and-response jubilation of Ray Charles's "What'd I Say." The doors to the sublime have all been flung open — far-off violence, intimations of apocalypse, and (most significantly) the lust for twirling, performing female bodies. But one can't help but ask, in the face of all this eros and thanatos, *whose* sublimity is this, *whose* eclecticism, *whose* fascination, *whose* dazzled gawk? Think of that medley of atavistic male impulses, roaring along a bit too easily to the beat of black music: Bruce Conner tried to take in the world, but couldn't come unstuck from his place in it. A facile point, I know — it's wheedling, and pedantic, and irritating, and obtuse. It is also, to use Conner's word, true.

Bruce Conner: 'It's All True'

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