

Jones, Kristin M. "Bruce Conner: It's All True' Review: Placing His Dark Visions," *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 July 2016.

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‘Bruce Conner: It’s All True’ Review: Placing His Dark Visions

Works that evoke an apocalyptic Americana, from an influential but underexplored figure.

By

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At once deadpan and poetic, amorphous and rigorous, ironic and mystical, the work of the Kansas-born artist and filmmaker Bruce Conner (1933–2008) is as elusive as it is visionary. His death-haunted assemblages are redolent of revival tents, carnivals and junk shops, while his groundbreaking found-footage films reflect Atomic Age darkness and euphoria. He also created performances, immersive environments, photographs and collages documenting the punk scene, and meditative works on paper. A major figure in the art world of San Francisco, where he lived for much of his life, Conner was wary of being categorized—his art is thus widely influential but underexplored.



Bruce Conner's 'Child' (1959-60). PHOTO: ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY

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The title of "Bruce Conner: It's All True," a richly multifaceted exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, borrows a phrase from a letter in which the artist listed wildly contradictory descriptions of himself and his work. Organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the retrospective, featuring more than 250 works, was co-curated by a team from both institutions. It will open in late October at SFMOMA and travel to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid in 2017.

The show immediately plunges visitors into Conner's apocalyptic Americana with his debut film, "A Movie" (1958), one of seven moving-image works that are projected in screening rooms punctuating the exhibition (additional videos are screening on monitors on the first floor, and films are also being shown in a separate program). It assembles a dreamlike, rhythmically edited faux epic from film leader and scraps of footage depicting scantily clad women, scenes of adventure and disaster, and a blooming mushroom cloud. The devastating "Report" (1963-67)—another brilliantly edited collage film—reflects Conner's distress over both President Kennedy's assassination and the media response to the event. Conner wrestled with the project, reworking "Report" numerous times as he came to terms with Kennedy's death.

Conner also filmed his own footage, as in the lushly psychedelic "Looking for Mushrooms" (1959-67/1996), which is also screening in an earlier version. Music by Terry Riley accompanies images including flowers and fireworks, some in rapturous multiple exposures, as well as an appearance by Timothy Leary, who joined in a quest for magic mushrooms while Conner and his wife, Jean, were living in Mexico.

Conner's densely layered early paintings incorporate materials such as charcoal or gold leaf, but they reveal less of the mordant wit that surfaced in assemblages like "Ratbastard" (1958), a portable piece with a handle attached. Many of his assemblages are shrouded with nylon stockings—a material he used as fluidly as pen or paint—or include pendulous, flotsam-and-jetsam-stuffed stockings. Invoking themes from femmes fatales to Christian symbolism, he encrusted objects with feathers, nails, newspaper clippings, photographs, fur and more.

Some assemblages that glitter with beads and sequins or pay tribute to Hollywood stars recall boxes and collages by Joseph Cornell—another artist who transfigured found objects and made indelible avant-garde films—but Conner's vision in these works, though it can have a magical quality, evokes darker, moldering realities, as in "Black Dahlia" (1960), which alludes to a notorious L.A. murder.

From 1959 to 1963, Conner expressed horror and revulsion at the state of the world more directly in a separate series of eerily charred-looking "black wax" sculptures. The most famous is "Child" (1959-60), a figure with a gaping mouth seated in a

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wooden high chair and caught in a web of torn nylon. Its fragile materials have been extensively restored.

Conner eventually abandoned making assemblages. He wrote, in a letter quoted in the exhibition catalog, of his anxiety over "being cataloged and filed away." He turned toward more conceptual work, including a real-life political campaign for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1967, for which he created promotional materials and gave his occupation as "nothing."

He more lyrically pointed to an uncertain identity in the "Angels," ghostly life-size photogram self-portraits on which he collaborated with the photographer Edmund Shea during the mid-'70s. Nine are exhibited in a black-walled room, accompanied by the sound of crickets.

Conner's works on paper include drawings in which masses of tiny marks made with felt-tip marker are organized around geometric shapes, and ink drawings in which pinpoints of blank paper resemble fields of stars. He also paid homage to Max Ernst's collage "novels" by creating collages from engraved illustrations (in another conceptual gesture, Conner made some collages into photo-etchings that he exhibited and published under Dennis Hopper's name).

One important technique Conner explored over time involved creating meticulous arrangements of Rorschach-like inkblots. Suggesting mysterious hieroglyphics, intricately patterned textiles or fantastic insect specimens, they invite wonder and meditative attention.

The show concludes with Conner's last completed film, "Easter Morning" (2008), in which he reworked footage he shot decades earlier. Luminous as stained glass, its sensual and mystical images—a burning candle, flowers and shadowy foliage, a crucifix, a patterned carpet, a nude woman in sunlight—are rendered even more hypnotic by Mr. Riley's composition "In C" (1964) on the soundtrack, performed on antique Chinese instruments. Summoning thoughts of death and resurrection, it's a fitting end to a journey through Conner's resonant work.

Bruce Conner: It's All True

Museum of Modern Art

Through Oct. 2