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The Early Life of Bruce Conner and His Rat Bastard Bohemia

By John Seed

In 1967 I quit the art bizness. When I would get letters regarding exhibitions, my work, etc., I would throw them away, sometimes reply, sometimes send it back saying DECEASED.

—Bruce Conner, 1974



Now that Bruce Conner actually *is* deceased — he died in 2008 at the age of 74 — his many efforts to deflect attention and avoid valorization of his work seem to have backfired, big time. Conner, a shapeshifting boundary-tester whose oeuvre includes film and video, painting, assemblage, drawing, prints, photography, photograms, and performance, was recently the subject of a 50-year retrospective, *Bruce Conner: It's All True*, at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. The show will open at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on October 29.

Conner is also the central figure in two recently published books. The first, *Bruce Conner: The Afternoon Interviews* by V. Vale, is a compendium of previously untranscribed phone interviews from the late 1970s to 2005. The second, *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association* by Anastasia Aukeman, provides a scholarly and engaging glimpse into the bohemian enclave that formed around the artist in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It presents a wealth of images, anecdotes, and facts that help resurrect the early history

and accomplishments of artists and poets who thrived in the rich and tolerant atmosphere of the Bay Area, weaving their stories into the broader fabric of postwar American culture. Aukeman has also organized the group's first show in nearly 60 years, *The Rat Bastard Protective Association*, at the Landing in LA.

With MoMA posthumously anointing Conner "one of the foremost American artists of the postwar era," he and his art have officially entered the canon, despite — but also because of — the Wile E. Coyote-esque efforts he made to resist the domesticating influences of the art world. "One of Bruce Conner's biggest fears, and perhaps our own," writes curator Natasha Boas, in her introduction to *Bruce Conner, The Afternoon Interviews*, "was that a museum retrospective might declaw his work or a curatorial essay might defang his intentions." In a 1974 interview with Paul Karlstrom, Conner

personalized the dangerous fate of art objects that enter museums: “If it [the object] becomes historical it exists as a weapon to me as a person, as an artist.”

This ambivalent dance of intimacy with cultural institutions began in Kansas, where Conner was born, shaped, and raised. “When you meet him,” wrote curator Walter Hopps in a 2002 essay for *BOMB* magazine, “he can seem like the most normal Midwestern man — like a classically constructed Kansan house. But then there are all these odd corners and nooks; he’s got quite an attic stuck on him, and there are strange things going on in it.” In one indication of this strangeness, as a young man in Wichita, Conner used to regularly steal and then return an Albert Pinkham Ryder painting from a local museum. Apparently he wanted to violate the sanctity of the institution while claiming one of its choice relics as his own. To say that Conner was an outsider who also wanted to belong is to barely scratch the surface of his paradoxical persona. His works are often both grimly fascinating and off-putting — just like the man who made them. For example, one of his best-known works, the notorious mixed-media sculpture “Child” (1959–60), features a desiccated male mummy lashed to a wooden chair by web-like skeins of nylon stockings.

Although Conner did what he could to keep the public at a distance in the early days of his career — even once asking a San Francisco gallery to present his work as that of “the late Bruce Conner” — he was also the much-loved “president” of a tight community of artist/bohemians: The Rat Bastard Protective Association.

Living in and around an apartment building at 2322 Fillmore Street known as Painterland, the artists and poets who made up the Rat Bastards included Conner and his wife Jean, Wallace Berman, Robert Branaman, Joan Brown, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, George Herms, Alvin Light, Michael McClure, Manuel Neri, and Carlos Villa.

The Rat Bastards had at least one mock hazing — Conner asked Manuel Neri to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge, which he fortunately declined to do — and an official stamp that Conner applied to the back of paintings in place of signatures. Conner also stamped tables, menus, signs on telephone poles, and the leotard of an unlucky waitress. The group had no manifesto but seemed to live in concert with the spirit of Ken Kesey’s *Merry Pranksters*: “Everybody is going to be what they are, and whatever they are, there’s not going to be anything to apologize about.” One of the accomplishments of Aukeman’s book is that it clearly examines the interchanges and overlaps between the Rat Bastards and the Beat Generation as a whole.

Painterland was a bland three-story stucco and wood apartment building with seven rooms, with 14-foot ceilings in four large flats. For roughly 15 years, between 1950 and 1965, it was home to an array of painters, poets, and musicians who paid around \$65 per month in rent. It was a place that inspired conviviality: When two of the couples who lived there, Bill and Joan Brown and Wally Hedrick and Jay DeFeo, wanted to see more of each other, they cut a hole in the wall between their apartments.

Aukeman, an art historian and curator who teaches at Parsons School of Design in New York City, made an important discovery in the course of her research — a treasure trove of banker boxes filled with the contact sheets from photographer Jerry Burchard — which provided rare, high-quality black-and-white images of the Rat Bastards in their milieu. Burchard’s works endow *Welcome to Painterland* with a sense of visual authenticity and present its key players — most of whom are familiar only in later photos — in the bloom of their youth.

Welcome to Painterland opens with an extended introduction that puts the group’s identity and sense of purpose into context:

The RBPA was a social group and an artistic alliance in equal measure. It filled an urgent need at a time when Bay Area artists were isolated from artists elsewhere in the country, lacking both galleries and serious collectors to support their artistic endeavors. Assemblage was the common denominator in the group during these early years, when their works often addressed consumerism, the drug culture, and political unrest.

Conner, who worked in assemblage until 1964 (he quit making them after they became desirable collectables), made what is likely the first official Rat Bastard work: a kind of dark and tattered canvas satchel that contained feathers, doll heads, and peyote buttons. After his works were featured in a landmark museum show at MOMA in 1961, “The Art of Assemblage,” the Conners left the Bay Area. They spent a year living cheaply in Mexico and then in Massachusetts, then returned to the Bay Area in March of 1965, just six months before Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick received their eviction notice from 2322 Fillmore Street. The November 1965 removal of DeFeo’s epic painting “The Rose” (taken by an unidentified photographer) marked the end of Painterland. DeFeo and Hedrick split up after the eviction, adding another layer of finality to the end of an era.

Welcome to Painterland resurrects a host of characters, anecdotes, and galleries — some obscure, some legendary. One example is artist Clay Spohn, whose Dadaesque 1949 installation “Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects” — which included male and female “chastity belts” fashioned from bicycle seats — was displayed at the 1949 San Francisco Art Association’s costume ball. Another figure whose cultural contributions are revisited wasn’t an artist. Alfred Frankenstein, the fair-minded art and music critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, played a crucial role in observing and chronicling the art and activities of San Francisco’s avant-garde.

An entire chapter of the book is devoted to artist-run galleries of the Fillmore, filling in a historical gap with accounts of nearly forgotten spaces including the Six Gallery (where Allen Ginsberg gave the first public reading of *Howl*), East and West Gallery, Spatsa, Batman Gallery, and Semina Gallery: a roofless, abandoned houseboat converted by Wallace Berman. According to Aukeman, “the role [of these galleries] in shaping the artists and their community cannot be overstated.” In just one example, the Rat Bastard Protective Association led a parade to their 1958 opening at the Spatsa Gallery, a converted garage/storefront that had been rented for \$35 per month.

The final chapter of Aukeman’s book, “‘Woodshedding’ Years: The RBPA Into the 1960s,” deals with the various ways in which the members of the group disbursed, withdrew from the “scene,” and moved toward distinctive individual achievements. This chapter provides an opportunity, among other things, for Aukeman to say more about the various individuals whom she discovered and came to admire as she wrote:

The book began as a story about Bruce Conner, but other artists and poets soon shared the stage. McClure became a bigger part of the story than I anticipated. I fell in love with Joan Brown and her work. Likewise Manuel Neri. When I began writing I had only a passing knowledge of Wally Hedrick’s work; now I have such admiration for the guy. And then of course, Jay DeFeo. She was the beating heart of the 2322 Fillmore Street community — DeFeo and of course her monumental work “The Rose.”

Aukeman’s richly detailed and heavily footnoted book contains six chapters followed by a chronology and copious chapter notes. “The book has so many footnotes,” Aukeman explains, “in part because I was constantly stumbling upon more details that reinforced the overall narrative and I wanted to include them, like crumbs for future researchers, without overwhelming the main story.” One charming detail: artist Joan Brown once made and exhibited a parody of a Clyfford Still abstraction that was “painted” with peanut butter and jelly.

As she conducted research and wrote, Aukeman was reminded of her visits with two uncles who had been part of a Northern California commune in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

The community at 2322 Fillmore Street inspired similar feelings in me, of fascination and longing for a similar community of my own. I have deep friendships, certainly, but their sense of pulling together for a common aesthetic cause, driven by a philosophy of how life should be lived, outside the mainstream, is unusual.

It's hard to pull something like that off.

The Rat Bastard Protective Association *continues at the Landing (5118 W. Jefferson, Los Angeles) through January 7, 2017.*

Bruce Conner, *It's All True opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (151 Third Street, San Francisco) on October 29 and will be on view through January 22, 2017.*

Bruce Conner: The Afternoon Interviews *is available from RE/Search Publications.*

Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association *is published by the University of California Press and available from Amazon and other online booksellers.*