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CONTEMPORARY ART & DESIGN

THE LANDING, LOS ANGELES
Rat Bastard Protective Association
(October 1, 2016 - January 7, 2017)

In New York and Los Angeles scenes notwithstanding, the late-1950s/early-60's Beat movement was based in San Francisco. It had a literary home at City Light Books in North Beach and an artistic one at "Painterland," the multi-studio complex in the Fillmore District. It was Painterland that Bruce Conner established the Rat Bastard Protective Association. Under this playful moniker gathered most of the artists working in the complex, and a broad swath of their friends besides. In fact, by the time the Association formed, painting wasn't the only, or even the dominant, practice in Painterland. Conner and others in his cohort were rapidly moving from painting to assemblage, excited by the expressive potential "found objects" afforded.



As the stunning exhibition - worthy of a small museum - at Landing demonstrated, some Rat Bastard artists went wholly over into pasted papers and cobbled-together objects, while others kept painting but took a more and more extravagant attitude toward putting pigment on support, often combining scraps and discards into their paints to give their textures - and, more importantly, their imagery - an abject quality. The Landing exhibition also showed how important assemblage remained, even to the most devoted assemblage aficionados: something about paper, as surface and as stuff, provoked the Rat Bastard Protectivists into productive

paroxysm. Perhaps their friendships with Beat poets such as Michael McClure gave them a jones for the page itself. Perhaps their sensitivity to the new of the times made them see their own art as a kind of newspaper of the soul. To be sure, the Landing show featured great painting and sculpture by Carlos Villa, Wally Hedrick, Joan Brown, Robert Branaman, Manuel Neri and the under-remembered Alvin Light. But it's the drawing and the assembling, realized by the likes of Jean Conner (Bruce's wife), Wallace Berman, and George Herms, as well as several of the paintings and sculptors, that gave the show its meaning and character.

Painterland was a magnet for a very gifted people, but Bruce Conner was the genius at its heart. His vision was so broad, ambitious and complex, and his world view so incisive and ornery, that out of necessity he became, as was said of Picasso, "pathologically inventive." "Bruce Conner: It's All True" clarifies Conner's voluble, mischievous, anxious, angry, verbal, visual and musical sensibility, almost to the point of confusion. But it's a giddy, enlightening confusion, an adventure not simply into someone's head but into worlds of experience, whether it's the Cold War, the Punk Scene or psychedelia. Assemblage was perfect for Conner, a way of breaking down and rebuilding the world; but after he gave up the practice in the mid-60's (deeming it too popular), he maintained the bricoleur attitude and sense of adventure, coming up with maze-like drawings, photogravure collages, ink-blot washes, body sized photograms, rock-and-roll photography and myriad other devices and gambits. For instance, the survey includes documents from Conner's 1967 run for San Francisco's Board of Supervisors.