

ART

Relics of works for which the artist risked life and limb

A dozen or so black-and-white photographs are spread on the desk. A face in a ski mask, all but eyes and lips obscured. A prostrate male body, strapped to the floor. A man gripping his own left biceps: a bare arm with two black dots and a long black trickle — evidence of a gunshot wound.

Crime-scene pictures? A police file, perhaps?

Even in the context of other photographs — kids' war toys, an apparently empty hall — one would hardly guess that these are publicity photos, offered by an art museum public-relations officer to a newspaper art columnist. But then, the art of Chris Burden, subject of a retrospective exhibition currently at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, has never been predictable.

Take the picture of the wounded man, for instance. The man is Burden. The picture is a document of the aftermath of his 1971 performance piece, "Shoot." At Burden's request, before an invited audience at a Santa Ana gallery, a friend had fired a .22-caliber rifle bullet through Burden's left arm from a distance of 15 feet.

The other photographs, too, depict the artist: on the floor, between live wires submerged in buckets of water, at risk of electrocution; concealed from all eyes for a piece called "You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City." The pictures are records of some of Burden's earliest, most notorious work — the work that made him one of the central figures in the art of the past decade.

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"Chris Burden: A Twenty Year Survey" was organized by

On Art



Charles Desmarais

Newport Harbor curators Anne Ayres and Paul Schimmel, and will travel to museums in Boston and Pittsburgh. It has all the trappings of a traditional museum exhibition: pedestals and frames and little labels to tell you what you're looking at.

Burden's best-known work, though, is unexhibitable in the traditional museum format. It consists of actions, not products, which could only be shown by restaging the events. This period of his work, therefore, is represented by a display of "relics" — objects associated with the performances.

Even Chris Burden could be excused for not wanting to relive the infamous first three years of his career.

It's a career that began to attract attention in April 1971, when he locked himself in a 2-by-2-by-3-foot locker at the University of California, Irvine, for five days. He spoke to no one, ate nothing, and never got out.

In those early years, he hung naked by his heels from the rafters of a gymnasium, crawled unclothed with his hands behind his back through 50 feet of broken glass, and recruited volunteers to push pins into his body. For "Doorway to

Heaven," 1973, he pushed live electric wires into his chest.

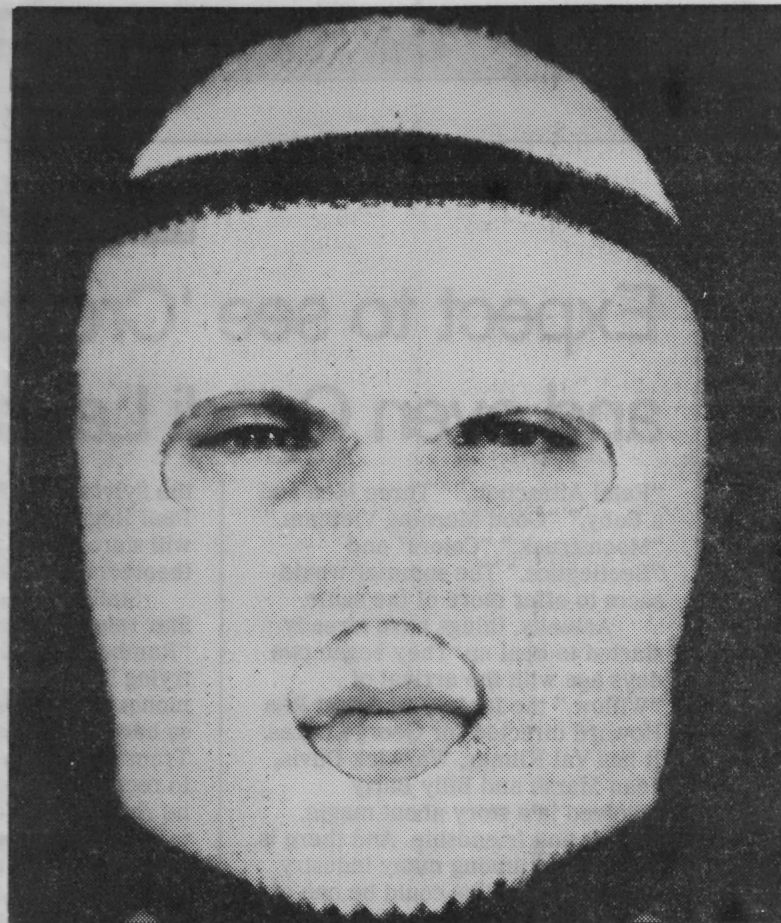
By 1974 he reached the depths of this stage in his work when he presented "Trans-Fixed" in Venice: "I stood on the rear bumper of a Volkswagen. I lay on my back over the rear section of the car, stretching my arms onto the roof. Nails were driven through my palms into the roof of the car . . . Screaming for me, the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. . . ."

As disturbing as this work is in the retelling, the gallery of relics is deceptively austere. Here, there are no films or videotapes, no large photographs. One finds only rows of vitrines holding seemingly innocuous objects (the nails from "Trans-Fixed"; a handful of shattered glass) and small cards with descriptive texts. As you read the documentation, though, and learn the significance of the relics, the effect is quite unnerving.

Burden's early work pried at social and artistic boundaries, certainly. It required viewers to reconsider the concept of aesthetic risk-taking (it could hardly seem "risky" anymore to switch, say, from minimal art to conceptual art).

And it involved (or implicated) the audience by requiring it to witness pain for art's sake — even, at times, imposing responsibility for the artist's safety, or for the success of a piece, on individuals or groups of viewers.

At the same time, it explored the then-new territory of performance art, a movement bent on the destruction of the traditional separation between an artist and his or her work — between what is said and who is saying it.



Newport Harbor Art Museum

"You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City," by Chris Burden, 1971, from "Chris Burden: A 20-Year Study" at the Newport Harbor Art Museum.

This challenge to a commodity-oriented art world permeates all of his work of this period. But it was stated no more directly than when he had his body mounted, supported by a sort of sling, on a wall at the Utah Museum of Art. The living artwork replaced a work in a gallery full of Renaissance religious paintings.

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Starting in the mid-1970s Burden's work shifted radically. His more recent work concentrates on two main interests: technology and the tools of war.

Burden has since reinvented television and the automobile, re-created classic scientific ex-

periments, and come up with such fantasies as a flying kayak. His 1984 "Beam Drop" consists of 60 steel beams up to a ton each dropped, one by one, from a height of 100 feet into a 35-foot-square pit of wet cement.

Three major installations in the Newport show deal with the vastness of modern military power. "The Reason for the Neutron Bomb," 1979, for example, fills a sizable gallery with 50,000 nickels capped by 50,000 match heads, each of which represents a tank in the arsenal of the Soviet Union.

"Samson," 1985, is a 100-ton jack driven by the entry turnstile at the museum that threatens to destroy the very building housing the exhibition.

The later work commands the largest portion of Burden's retrospective, is the most compelling visually, and deals with BIG ISSUES like war and peace and institutional power. It is politically conscientious and socially unobjectionable.

Yet for all of that, it doesn't have the passion, ingenuity, conceptual clarity or terrible righteousness of his first explosion of ideas. Burden can never return to that work — nor, for his own sake and ours, would we want him to. But little that has been done since by him or any other artist is etched so deeply into the record of art.

It is a repugnant, fascinating, desperately significant scar in the flesh of our generation's history.

"Chris Burden: A Twenty Year Survey" is at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach (in the Newport Center), through June 12. (714) 759-1122.