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CHILD (1959), originally a protest of a death sentence, came to symbolize themes of cruelty and inhumanity.

Too much is just right

Masterworks found in every gallery of Conner retrospective

By Charles Desmarais

If there was ever any doubt about who should be recognized as the greatest artist the Bay Area ever produced, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has resolved the question definitively with its lovingly presented, sweeping analysis of the work of Bruce Conner. The exhibition "It's All True," opening Saturday, Oct. 29, comprises some

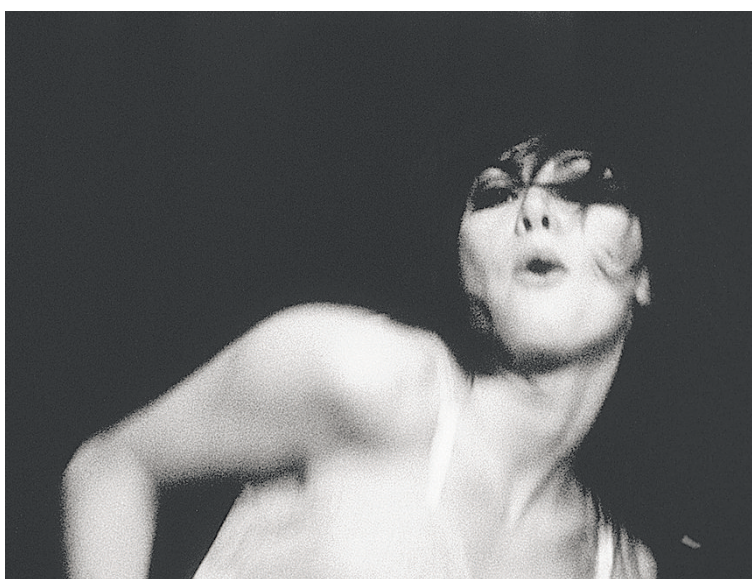
Bruce Conner: It's All True: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except Wednesdays; until 9 p.m. Thursdays. Saturday, Oct. 29-Jan. 22. \$19-\$25 (Free 18 and under). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

300 works and is accompanied by an authoritative, 384-page book. Together, show and catalog provide a detailed argument for the artist's dominance in a range of media, from collage and assemblage, to independent film, to conceptual art.

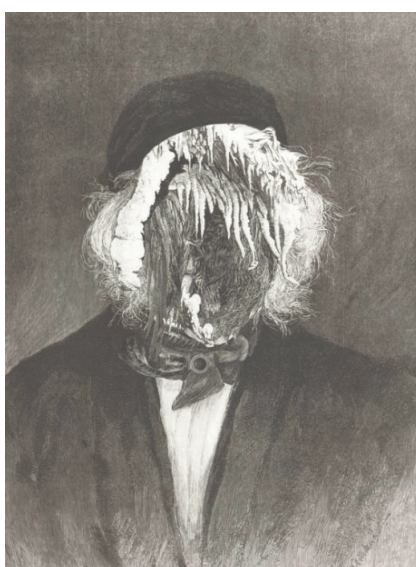
But it is the many layers and subtleties of meaning, not the varied means of Conner's expression, that place him at the top of a proud list of San Franciscan contributors to art's vast history.

His art is the embodiment of primal angst and spiritual yearning — of our mortal fears, joys, pain and pleasures, and our aching need to transcend them. Like the peyote buttons and other fuels of his early creative efforts, his work sets us teetering on

Conner continues on E3



Above: A still from the film BREAKAWAY (1966) features the 23-year-old dancer and later singer Toni Basil.



Left: THE ARTIST (March 21, 1990) is a collage of found illustrations.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



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PARTITION (1961-63), shown front and back, is made of three wood panels, each 29 inches wide, with materials like a maraca, straw-hat fragment and tinsel.

Conner's work an embrace of entropy

Conner from page E1

a thin edge between enlightenment and oblivion. The product of a prolific career spanning more than 50 years, buried for long periods by the neglect of the art world and his own consuming wariness, the work smolders still with a palpable heat.

SFMOMA has a broad international agenda and a penchant for market-sanctioned Big Art. It was crucial for its credibility that the museum take the lead in this new assessment of such a key figure in its midst, who made his work — much of which you could carry under one arm — from leftovers and discards. And it matters that the show takes things beyond the regional, in partnership with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, to acknowledge Conner (1933-2008) as among the most significant artists of the 20th century.

The exhibition is laid out chronologically, the only route possible through such a varied production. There are something like 18 discrete galleries, beginning with ephemera-filled cases that give a sense of, among other avatars, Conner the Dadaist performance artist — wearing surgical scrubs to receive an honorary doctorate; running for San Francisco supervisor — and Conner the conceptual artist — insisting that an employer-required fingerprint be treated as one of a series of multiple works of art.

Conner's attention to the aesthetics of even the slightest gesture extended to his requirement that titles be rendered in capital letters with no other punctuation, which he saw as "like objects in themselves. ... They have an architectural structure. Similar to newspaper headlines, true titles, imperative or directive phrasing, such as HELP, STOP, FREE, TAKE ONE."

The ephemera cases, along with a group of mid-1950s student paintings in the language of late Abstract Expressionism, are shown in a kind of entry hallway. I was surprised that the first larger gallery is devoted to a theater-style presentation of the 1958 masterpiece A MOVIE.

Conner has always been known for a substantial body of films with loose or nonexistent narrative structures. And A MOVIE — a collage of found footage snippets, some of them menacing, some comic, set to Ottorino Respighi's "Pines of Rome" — is widely recognized as groundbreaking. But in relation to his entire output,

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filmmaking has generally been considered a parallel but distinct pursuit. Here, SFMOMA implies a central place for film.

At MoMA, where the show was presented earlier this year, the films were shown in spaces entered through sound-dampening doors; in San Francisco, music issues freely from darkened galleries, becoming a kind of soundtrack for the exhibition itself. And it works in this instance, where only one film features spoken words: Sculpture and graphics galleries are enlivened, moods shift, new sounds draw us along.

Many of the films have recently been restored, sometimes transferred to video. The results are downright gorgeous. Conner resisted digitizing his work, his media assistant and collaborator Michelle Silva has said, until he could no longer get the quality he demanded from analog processing shops.

That change of heart made possible a version of BREAK-AWAY (1966) that is as tonally rich in black-and-white as the day it was made. A visual expression of dance as joyous, dervish-mystical abandon, it features a Toni Basil as sensually alluring on the screen as the 23-year-old must have been in front of the camera.

Conner famously considered all his work, in any medium, to be subject to revision, if not perpetually unfinished. Museums and collectors might stay his hand when it came to, say, sculpture they presumed to own, but no one could stop him from endlessly revising his films, and digital tools only made that easier. REPORT, his elegy to John F. Kennedy and the era he represented, is exhibited at SFMOMA as a 16mm film. It went through at least eight versions from 1963 to 1967, but kept its title and form.

THREE SCREEN RAY (2006), on the other hand, is an entirely new digital piece, drawn from his seminal 1961 work COSMIC RAY, which continues its existence embedded within the later piece. (An interim work not included in the show, EVE-RAY-FOR-EVER (1965/2006), dispensed entirely with the Ray Charles soundtrack, the classic "What'd I Say.")



Still from CROSSROADS (1976), Conner's famous, mesmeric meditation on the first atomic bomb test.



SOUND OF TWO HAND ANGEL is a photogram made with Edmund Shea.

Curators usually have to mete out the best pieces to bring balance to an exhibition. But as one walks through this show, the realization dawns that virtually every room seems to contain at least one masterpiece. The assemblage sculpture that, to many, still defines Conner as an artist, occupies three large galleries and then some.

Yet these works — which were shown around the world, collected by museums and entered major private collections well before he was 30 years old — were all made in the first tenth of his career. By 1965, he was done with the art that had had critics comparing him to Robert Rauschenberg and curators including him in exhibitions of international influence.

It began in 1958 with RAT-BASTARD, a squarish canvas no bigger than 10 inches across,

which Conner slashed open and stuffed, along with costume jewelry, photographs and other found materials, into a pouch he made of nylon stockings. A canvas handle from which the object could hang on a wall — but which also allowed the artist to carry it like a purse — was nailed to the stretcher.

RAT-BASTARD and other nest-like, pendulous works take their place in the SFMOMA show alongside other horrid constructions with titles like SPIDER LADY HOUSE and ARACHNE (both 1959).

THE BRIDE (1960) is covered with molten wax. The exhibition label tells us that the artist kept the candles that cover the work burning throughout its first showing. Deeper, darker than a commitment to change, it was an embrace of entropy. Works that started their lives as accretions of the decrepit had nowhere to go but to dust. Reason enough to see this show: These will be different works when you see them next.

The so-called "dark sculptures," in their black-painted gallery, evidence an awesome gravity. At the nucleus of both room and exhibition: CHILD (1959), a slumping, dismembered figure with the painful grimace of a mummified corpse.

Aspects of CHILD's fascinating history are retold in a short catalog article. Owned for nearly half a century by the Museum of Modern Art, it was in storage for most of its existence and never shown at MoMA until this year. Yet it is a legendary cultural relic of its era. Originally cited by the artist as a protest against the death sentence imposed on one man, Caryl Chessman, it came to more generally symbolize cruelty and inhumanity, central themes of Conner's total oeuvre.

Avert your eyes from this

nightmare. Through a glass wall, the film LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS (1959-1967) offers relief, a gesture toward redemption. Its hallucinatory imagery and the words of Timothy Leary, chanted by the Beatles, draw you into Conner's short Mexican sojourn. It is a holistic vision — the resplendent PARTITION (1961-63) is part fleshly decadence, part Christian passion; CROSS (1962) conflates the corpus of Christ with an Aztec head.

There is much in the exhibition that cannot be adequately reproduced, and too much to sufficiently describe. Galleries overflowing with meditative abstract drawing; precisely arranged collages of old engravings; obsessive folded inkblot imagery; gritty photographs of punk music clubs and their denizens.

In Conner's case, too much is the right amount. He lived for too much. He was too much for most curators, who handled him gingerly or faced his rancor. Too much for an art world that wanted to set the terms of a relationship.

The denouement of the exhibition, though not the literal end of the gallery sequence, is a darkened room around which are arrayed eight of Conner's ANGELS (1973-75) — life-size photographs of his whole body that he made with another artist, Edmund Shea. Unique objects, acutely tangible as records of actual skin in contact with paper, they are also images that fairly glow from within. The physical become transcendent.

Are the angels meant to be our protectors, or do they defend against us? Through a window into an adjacent gallery, we glimpse the answer.

Beyond that glass wall, we encounter a spellbinding installation of Conner's famous, mesmeric meditation on the first atomic bomb test, CROSSROADS (1976). A work of fear-some monumentality even viewed on a small TV monitor (the way I first saw it years ago), the recently restored version presented here — in grand scale with a superb rendition of the Patrick Gleeson/Terry Riley score — is stupefying.

Insistent, numbing, repeating eruptions — clouds of a terrible, purposeless storm. We came upon this tempest through a chamber of spectral attendants — guardians of humankind or from it? Our world needs both.

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