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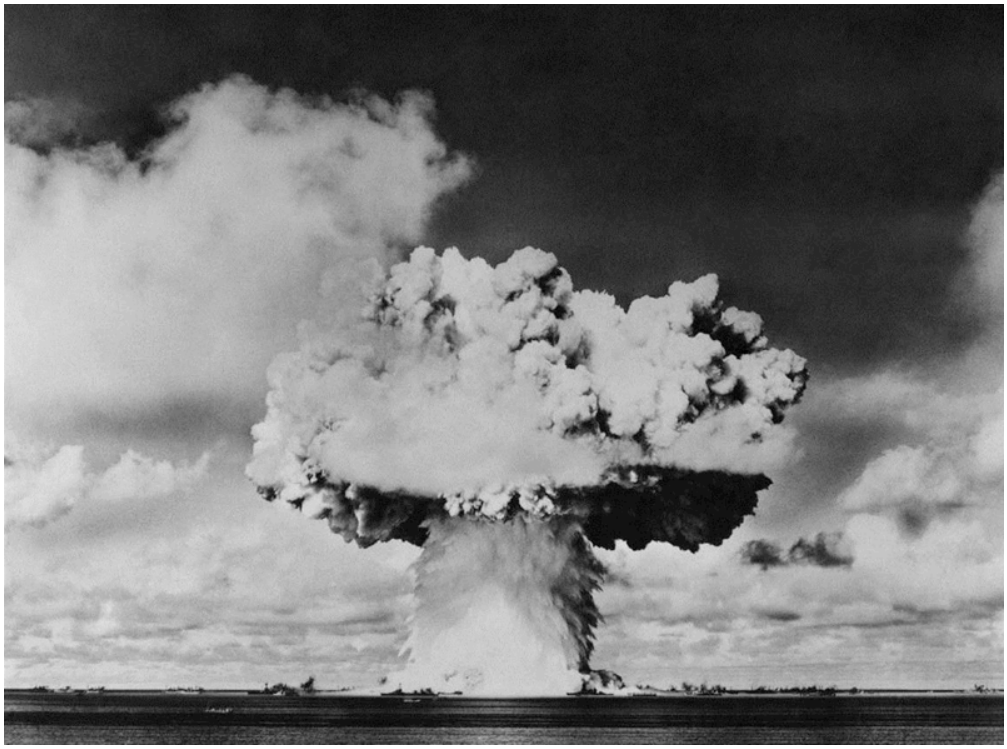
Apocalypse Now: MoMA's Bruce Conner Show Is Mind-Blowingly Good

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 08/26/16 10:52 AM



Bruce Conner, *Crossroads* (promotional still),1976, black-and-white 35mm film with sound, transferred to video, 37 minutes.
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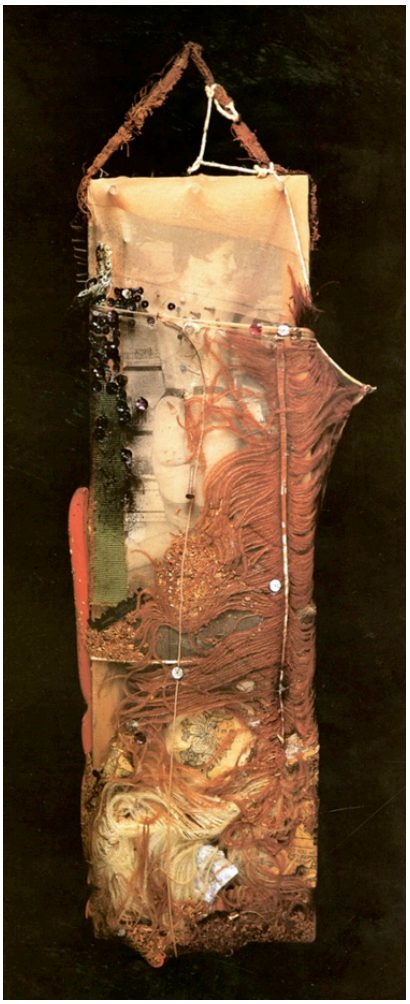
The Museum of Modern Art has wisely advertised its Bruce Conner retrospectivewith an image of *Bombhead*, a 1989/2002 print in which an army general's head is replaced with a mushroom cloud. This is a show that promises to blow your mind, and it lives up to that threat. Trippy, disturbing, entertaining, and whimsical all at once, "Bruce Connor: It's All True" is a marvelous look at a figure whose gleefully anarchic work called for the end of culture as we know it.

Like any great show about a great artist, this retrospective—which is curated by Stuart Comer and Laura Hoptman, of MoMA, and Rudolf Frieling, Gary Garrels, and Rachel Federman, of SFMOMA, where it will appear next—makes you wonder how its subject escaped from art history. Perhaps Conner's inability to be

categorized kept his work in the shadows. By the time he died at age 74 in 2008, the San Francisco–based artist had created films, collages, photograms, performances, assemblages, drawings, and paintings. He had been a part of the experimental film scene, toyed with institutional critique, quit the art world, observed the punk scene, and tried his hand at music. Putting labels on Conner is a lost cause; years from now, well after this perfectly paced and informative show, scholars may still not know where to place him.

Given Conner's off-the-wall tactics, it may come as a surprise that "It's All True" is a fairly straightforward retrospective. It's mostly chronological, and it starts rather appropriately at the beginning. Borrowing inspiration from Neo-Dada and Nouveau Réalisme, Conner's early assemblages take the term "painting" to task, bringing the medium into the third dimension and revealing it as a farce. *Spider Lady's Nest* (1959) features a window shade that, when pulled up, exposes a mess of cotton, nylon, fabric, beads, tassels, and the like, the message being that what lies beneath painting's pretty surface is trash. It's not hard to imagine reading this as an allegory for the work's time as well—clean homes, dirty consciences.



Bruce Conner, *Black Dahlia*, 1960, photomechanical reproductions, feather, fabrics, rubber tubing, razor blade, nails, tobacco, sequins, string, shell, and paint encased in nylon stocking over wood.

These early assemblages are not Robert Rauschenberg knockoffs, although they certainly draw inspiration from the Neo-Dadaist. In fact, these works are much darker than anything Rauschenberg made in the '50s, and they often suggest the wreckage of a bombed-out society. Some works, like *Black Dahlia* (1960), an homage to a Hollywood actress who was famously mutilated, even threaten viewers with concealed razor blades. These works are sharp, both figuratively and literally.

I have a feeling that Conner enjoyed making his viewers suffer—that he wanted to hurt their eyes and change the way they experience art. Sometimes, this was innocent fun. (Consider *Blue Plate/Special*, 1964, a paint-by-numbers version of Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. Create your own Renaissance

masterpiece—no skill required!) Other times, Conner seems to have taken pleasure in rattling viewers, offering them oddities like a sculpture of a burnt child in a high chair.

And then there are Conner's films, which are in a class of their own. Mainstream American filmmaking in the '50s and '60s was still entertainment, and Conner's intervention was to make going to the movies an unpleasant activity. *A Movie* (1958), a wild combination of appropriated clips of destruction, is perhaps Conner's most concise expression of his goals: death to culture, death to America, death to us all—a mass murder told through the images and films we know best. It's easy viewing compared to something like *Breakaway* (1966), a film in which Toni Basil gyrates and leaps to the tune of her titular song. If this is a music video, it's one told in signature Conner style—as an assault on viewers, with dropped frames, fast motion, slow motion, jarring zooms, rapid-fire editing, sped-up images, and reversed footage. And then there's *Crossroads* (1976), a film of atomic-bomb tests at Bikini Atoll set to ambient music. Simultaneously hypnotic and extremely unsettling, *Crossroads* offers beauty in the form of mutually assured destruction. For all of Conner's violent impulses, there's also a strange spirituality that courses through much of his work. Admittedly, his most overtly spiritual works are not his best. I find his drawings, which sometimes resemble mandalas and were often made by repeatedly touching pen to paper, boring and repetitive. More successful are his Max Ernst–like late collages, which reconfigure illustrations of biblical scenes to include landmines and bald eagles. These works could be construed as ironic, but it seems that Conner really did have faith in something beyond this world of atomic bombs and images.

In the later part of his career, Conner combined his destructive tendencies with an impulse toward rebuilding. His *Ace Bandage Wrapped Brick* (1979), a brick swaddled in an elastic wrap offers a hint at healing. The damage had already been done in the '60s; now it was time to start again.

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