

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

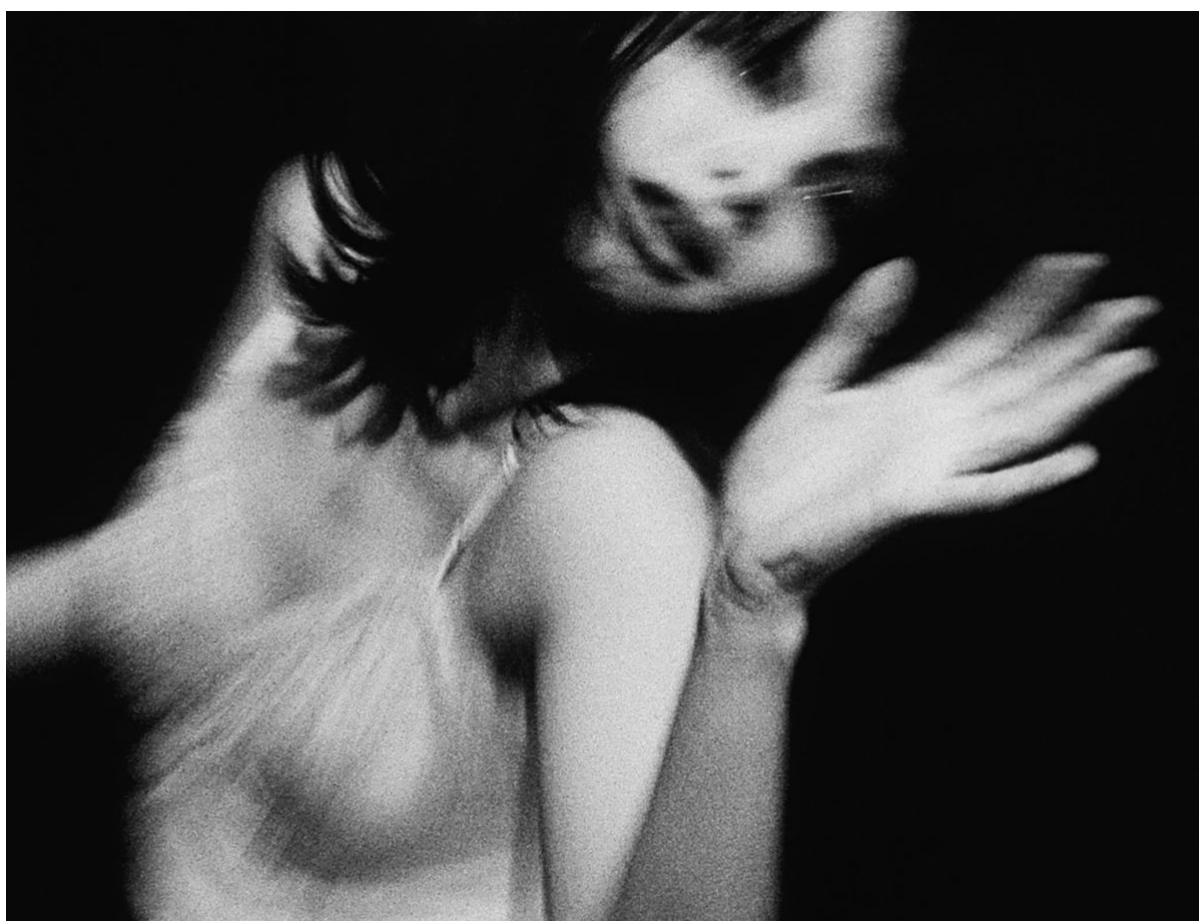
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BRUCE CONNER'S CRUSADE OF REINVENTION

MOMA's retrospective of the mercurial Bay Area artist showcases his work as a sculptor, filmmaker, painter, photographer, and puller of stunts.



A detail from Bruce Conner's 16-mm. film "Breakaway" (1966), featuring an incandescent performance by the then twenty-three-year-old Toni Basil.
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In 1963, Bruce Conner decided to find himself. He was back in San Francisco, after a year in Mexico documenting his search for mind-altering mushrooms (Timothy Leary has a flickering cameo in the resulting short film). But this wasn't just any Beat-era soul-searching; Conner wanted to invite every living Bruce Conner to attend a convention. The plan went unrealized—like many conceptual pranks of the period, it was unrealizable—but he did mail Christmas cards to some of his namesakes, along with a pair of

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campaign-style buttons, a green one that read “I Am Not Bruce Conner” and a contrary red one, “I Am Bruce Conner.” Both facts were true for every man who opened the envelope.

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The buttons and the ecstatic film collage “Looking for Mushrooms” are among some two hundred and fifty eye-opening works in the retrospective “Bruce Conner: It’s All True,” organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and dexterously installed on the sixth floor of MOMA by the curators Laura Hoptman and Stuart Comer. It’s the first major show in New York for the mercurial Bay Area artist, who died in 2008, at seventy-five. His career was so unpredictable—sculptor, filmmaker, painter, music-video pioneer, collagist, draftsman, punk-band photographer, puller of stunts—that his true medium was his refusal to meet expectations. Conner faked his death during his first brush with success, and later exhibited under pseudonyms, including Dennis Hopper (his friend), Justin Kase, and Emily Feather, whose gossamer inkblots, suggesting tantric drawings by fairies, mesmerize here.

The Kansas-born Conner first made his mark in the late fifties, with assemblages of found dolls, doodads, and nylon stockings. Many look dated now, but some still have the power to stun, notably the soot-black, wax-encrusted “Couch” (1963), a primal scream of a sculpture. Conner was included in MOMA’s genre-defining show “The Art of Assemblage,” in 1961, and abandoned the practice several years later. His impulse to assemble found parts of the world into something wholly new and anomalous found its greatest expression in film, the one form he kept coming back to. The show opens with “A Movie” (1958), a free-associative pageant of found footage, which flashes both slapstick (a clip of a periscope cuts to a voluptuous pinup, then to a speeding torpedo) and tragic (executed bodies strung up by their feet, an elephant swarmed by its hunters, children beset by famine), compressing the thrill, dread, desire, hostility, and too-muchness of life into twelve stunning minutes. Conner’s masterpiece—and the cornerstone of “It’s All True”—is “Crossroads” (1976), a meditation on the atomic bomb, one of the darkest truths of the twentieth century. Splicing together thirty-seven minutes of declassified footage of detonations at Bikini Atoll, Conner unspools a horrific beauty, at once disembodied and visceral, setting us on a soul-searching mission ourselves. ♦

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<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/bruce-conners-crusade-of-reinvention>