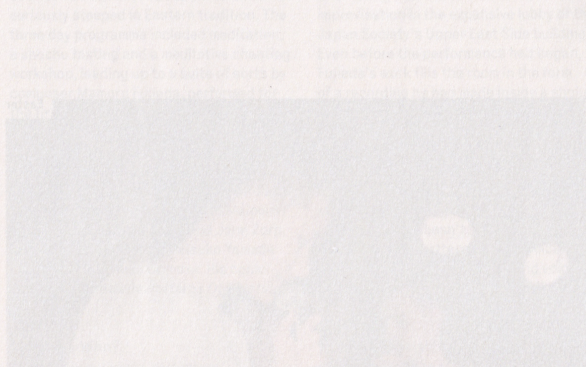


THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Lefebvre, Sam. 'On Site: Bruce Conner: *It's All True*,' *The Wire*. February 2017, pg. 71

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc



Bruce Conner *It's All True*

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, US
This writer is so haunted by the Ghost Ship warehouse fire — where 36 people perished at an underground gig in nearby East Oakland on 2 December — that Bruce Conner's macabre, charred sculptures are just nauseating. But Conner's work can do that to viewers in the best of moods.

A polymath, prankster and quintessential San Francisco artist, Conner is the subject of a career-spanning retrospective featuring *It's All True*, more than 300 objects and organised by and on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (after debuting at MOMA in New York). And though the breadth of media (photography, assemblage, film, drawing, performance, sculpture, and so on) underlines Conner as a figure of perennial reinvention, the exhibition conveys an abiding sensitivity to suffering; his black sculptures overwhelmed me because they're calibrated to convey the sort of crippling loss I brought into the room to begin with.

Conner, who died in San Francisco in 2008, moved to the city from the Midwest in 1957. As ephemera and early work in the exhibition's initial chamber and vitrines emphasise, his interest in identity and critical misdirection emerged early on — see campaign posters depicting his madcap bid for local office, and a grave 1959 exhibition announcement erroneously declaring his death.

Films punctuate the exhibition. *A Movie*, a 16mm film cut-up from 1958 that astutely connects war to sexual conquest, foreshadows the confrontational pacifism of punk artists such as, say, Gee Vaucher. (Not that the breasts in his work always come over like intentional commentary on toxic masculinity.) However, his 1976 redo of *Crossroads* — images of nuclear detonation set to meditative music by Terry Riley and Patrick Gleeson — strikes the wrong tone, to my mind; it abstracts the horror, instead of eliciting empathy or outrage.

Breakaway, though, is just right: frenetic editing matches the exuberance of its

subject, the dancer Toni Basil. It runs backwards, halfway through (although its structure complicates beginning and end), like a performed fantasy about recapturing one's first brush with euphoria.

The 1960 assemblage *Wednesday*, portraying a woman practically entombed in earthy material and thrift-store garments, looks like a premonition of The Cockettes' burnout. And Conner's general use of garbage — including the waste produced by San Francisco's predatory midcentury urban renewal schemes — reminds me of industrial and modern primitive figures such as Monte Cazazza, or Grux of Caroliner and Rubber O Cement.

But the loosely chronological exhibition, which is organised as much by medium as by sequence, underscores how Conner was more than prescient. He sometimes entered the subcultures whose themes and imagery he'd anticipated by a decade (and seemingly not with the goal, as such intergenerational mingling often does, of 'correcting' his spiritual offspring). Most significantly, he did so with punk.

Dozens of Conner's photographs for first-wave San Francisco punk's fanzine of record *Search & Destroy* appear salon-style alongside related photocopies and collage in an absorbing segment of *It's All True*. Photographer Ruby Ray, another *Search & Destroy* staffer and the subject of one Conner picture on display, seems the more intimate documentarian of the same scene in her 2013 book *From The Edge Of The World*.

But of particular note are his pictures of San Francisco group Crime, which capture the ghoulish players between poses — faces contorted such that they look momentarily rearranged. They're the ambush-style tabloid response to standby Crime photographer James Stark's iconic, carefully staged portraiture for the scene's most image-conscious group. And Conner's affecting 1996 assemblage tribute to Crime's late Frankie Fix — a photo and its degraded copy strewn with burnt plastic and soiled bandages — circles back to that palpable reverence for life.
Sam Lefebvre



Bruce Conner, *Crossroads* (1976)



Bruce Conner, *Breakaway* (1966)