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Bruce Conner's many editions of self in San Jose

By **Kenneth Baker** Updated 1:09 pm, Tuesday, April 7, 2015

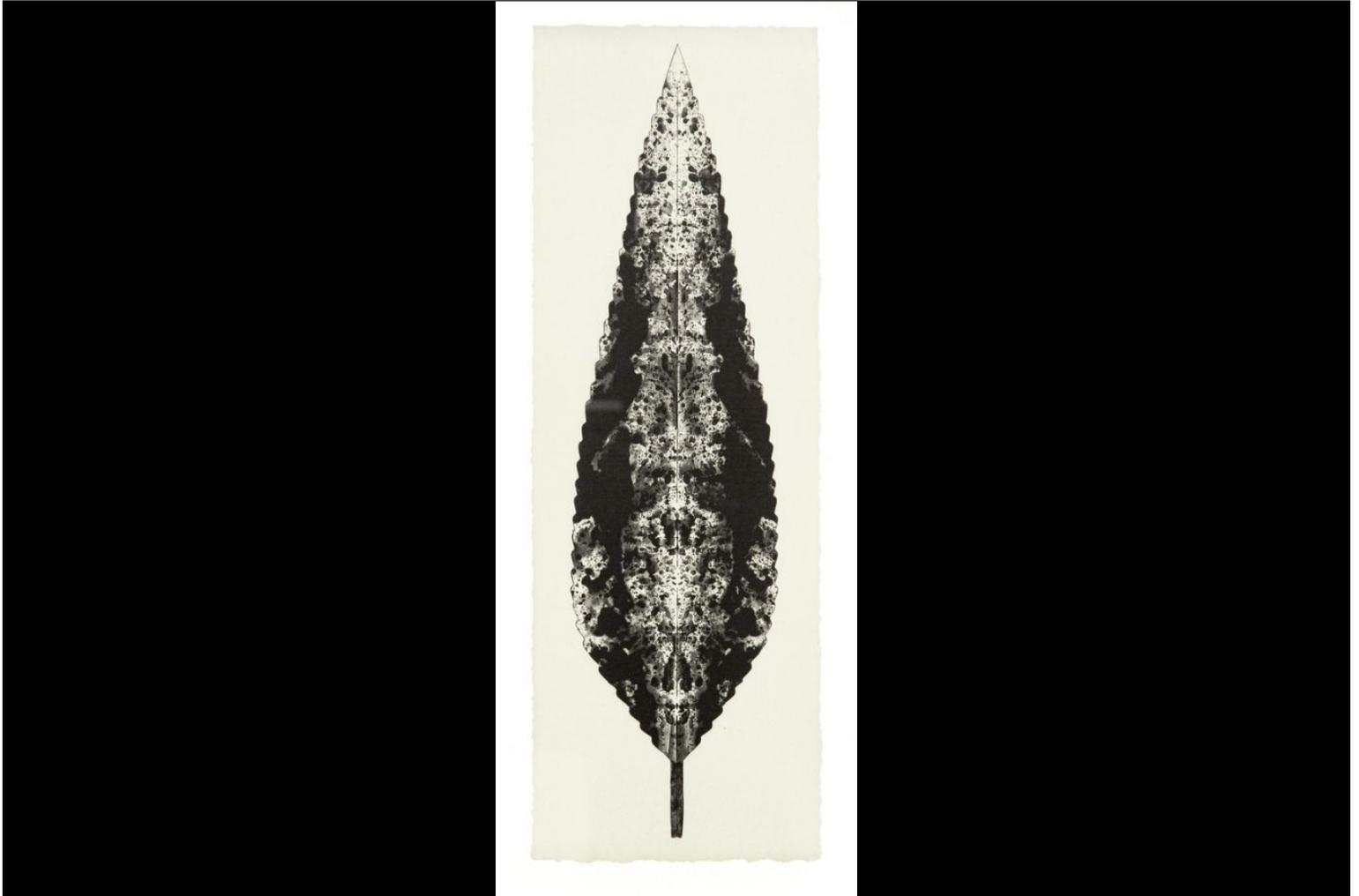


IMAGE 1 OF 3

"Dark Leaf" (2001), lithograph on paper by Anonymous (pseudonym of Bruce Conner). The artist preferred commercial over over fine art printing technology.

"Bruce Conner: Somebody Else's Prints" at the San Jose **Institute of Contemporary Art** reacquaints us with a rebarbative spirit encountered so seldom in today's culture that people seem no longer to miss it.

Those in the contemporary art world caught up in the scramble for recognition need the example of works by Conner (1933-2008) such as the 1965 lithographs "Thumb Print (April 26, 1965)" and "This Space Reserved for June Wayne."

The Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles was a force in the early '60s renaissance of editioned graphic arts as media of fresh creative invention. To be invited there, as Conner was in 1965, was a sign of career ascendancy that he characteristically acknowledged by acceding to it and then undermining it.

For example, knowing that finger marks on a plate were signs of insufficiently skilled effort to the master printers of Tamarind, Conner

produced an edition consisting of his thumbprint off center on a sheet otherwise empty, except for a second thumbprint at the lower right corner to serve as his signature.

The lowly pun on “print” is the least of this work’s insults to the dignity of the fine art graphics revival. The thumbprint signature certifies Conner’s authorship of the work but, unrecognizable, it also undercuts the work’s marketability, and whatever notoriety the artist’s name might bring to the press. Anyway, that was the case at the time: These gestures and the artifact have since become famous, as Conner must have known they might.

Punctuating the exhibition are some of the psychedelically detailed abstract ink drawings Conner made that sealed his preference for commercial over fine art printing technology. The latest work on view from 2003, Magnolia Editions’ stunning translation of a 1987 collage-based etching into a jacquard tapestry, attests to Conner’s never-ending restlessness in shuffling productive media and traces of personal artistry.

Conner was miffed to find that June Wayne, Tamarind’s founder and guiding spirit, was away on other business during his stint there, so he made another print that reproduces in blue letters on black the sign posted at her vacant, dedicated parking spot: “This Space Reserved for June Wayne.”

“Bruce Conner: Somebody Else’s Prints” comes to the institute from the [Ulrich Museum of Art](#) at [Wichita State University](#) in Conner’s Kansas hometown. It offers the broadest view of Conner’s work on paper available since the 2000 [de Young Museum](#) survey “2000 B.C.: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II,” and includes some works made later, among them 2001 Rorschach-blot-like leaves in ink on Mylar done in response to Sept. 11. He may have been thinking of leaves as symbols of the transience of lives, or of newscast images of sheets of paper drifting down by the thousand from the besieged twin towers.

In yet another disavowal of the significance of personal authorship, he attributed these works to Anonymous, perhaps partly in deference to the enormity of the events they referenced, relative to any individual’s possible creative rejoinder to them.

Death always shadowed Conner’s thinking about art, even before he began suffering from an ultimately fatal liver condition. The show includes one of his most famous images, “Bombhead” (2002), an inkjet print in which a mushroom cloud appears seamlessly grafted into a photograph of him in nondescript uniform, replacing face and head. In related works here based on stills from his anti-nuke film “Crossroads,” Conner digitally worked in faint images of some of the collaborative photograms he called “Angels.”

Conner’s disavowals of authorship were acknowledgments that his art came from many sources other than his so-called self, and symbolic attempts to dodge the inevitable, to give *his* death the slip. Among the most famous and visually arresting examples are the suites of etchings titled “The [Dennis Hopper](#) One Man Show,” based on collages Conner made from 19th century magazine engravings, those collages heavily indebted to predecessor works by [Max Ernst](#) (1891-1976).

Attribution to Conner’s friend and fellow Kansas native Dennis Hopper made a double-edged tribute: admiration, camaraderie, maybe even envy on the one hand, and delegation of mortality and blameworthiness on the other. As it happened, the younger Hopper outlived Conner by less than a year.

The [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) has a Conner retrospective somewhere on its long calendar, after its 2016 reopening. Meanwhile “Bruce Conner: Somebody Else’s Prints” is an introduction, or reintroduction, not to be missed.

Kenneth Baker is *The San Francisco Chronicle*’s art critic. E-mail: kennethbaker@sfgate.com Twitter: [kennethbakersf](#)

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