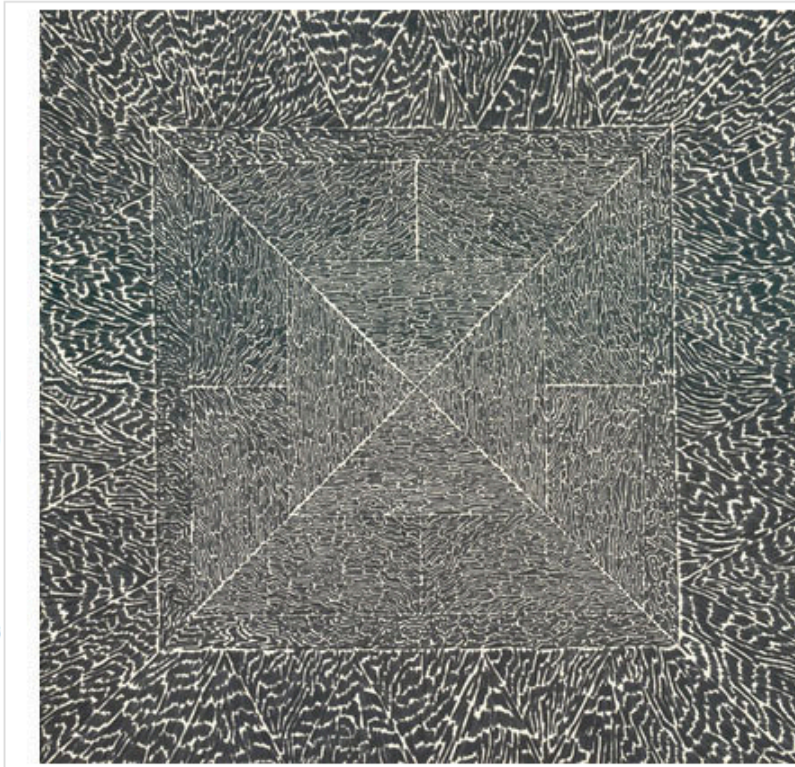


Bruce Conner: "Somebody Else's Prints" @ SJICA

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A conceptualist before the term was coined and an irrepressible shape-shifter whose career flipped restlessly between media, Bruce Conner (1933-2008) was one of the most incisive artists to have emerged from the Bay Area. Though his work roamed widely — from spiritual abstraction (in the mandala drawings) to Funk (in his nylon-socking wrapped assemblages) and to withering critiques of American culture (in his films) — these seemingly distant poles of his practice were united by his desire to penetrate life's mysteries and to resist anything that might get in the way. Ironically, the resistance Conner

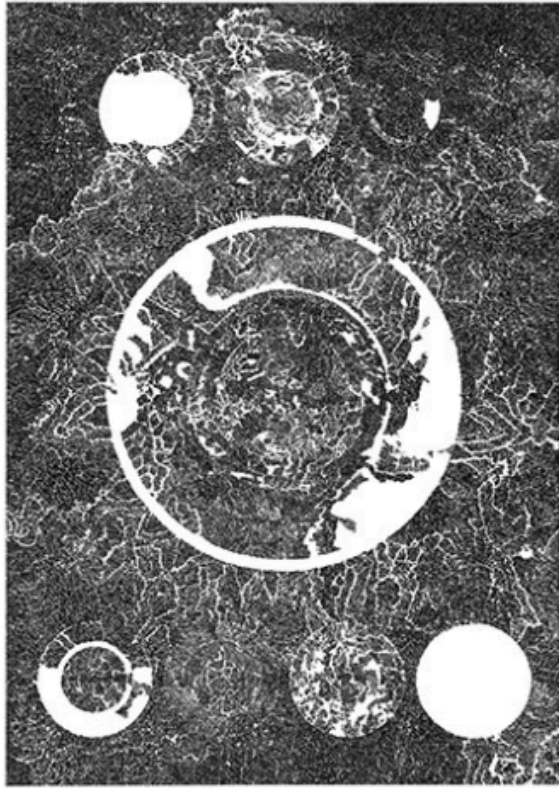


#126, 1970-71, offset lithograph on paper, 15 x 14.5"

encountered helped spawn the conceptual side of his art, which took the form of serious pranks that speak just as strongly to issues of value, authorship and authenticity today as they did during his prime in the 1960s and 1970s.

His artistic journey began when he "was about eleven years old..." he told an interviewer in 1983. "I was lying on the floor. I went into a state of consciousness which I couldn't describe afterwards...I changed and grew old, through all kinds of experiences, in worlds of totally different dimensions. And then I became aware of myself being in the room...I'm practically disintegrated. I'm an ancient person. My bones are falling apart. I can't move..." "There were," he concluded, "so many things that were unknown secrets, that adult society knew, that they didn't let children know about. I thought this was one of them."

Conner would spend his life trying to unlock those secrets. The search would lead him from his home in Wichita to Beat-era San Francisco and, subsequently, to Eastern religious philosophy, psychedelic drugs, rock music, politics and to close associations with many of that era's most important figures, among them the poet Michael McClure. Representative samples from these efforts can be seen in *Somebody Else's Prints*, an exhibit of works on paper organized by the Ulrich Museum of Art in Wichita, so named for Conner's career-length penchant for deflecting the spotlight away from himself. Though it excludes key pieces of the Conner



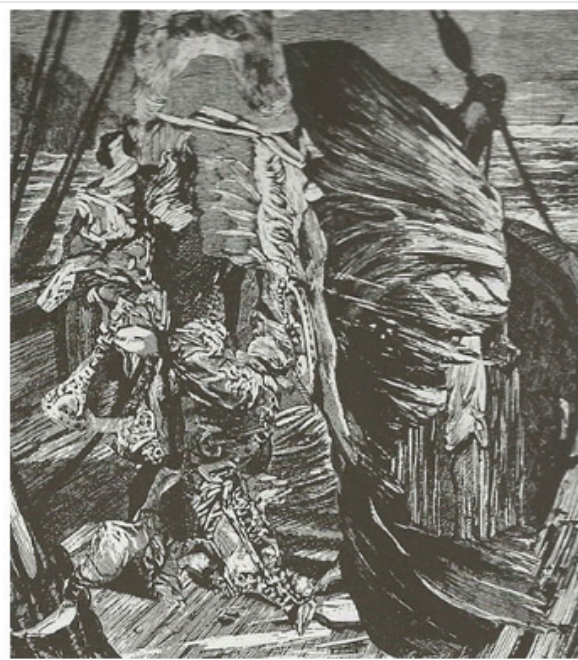
#100, 1970-71, lithograph on paper, 29 x 29"

oeuvre –the experimental films, the ghostly photograms and the nylon stocking-wrapped assemblages of detritus – it shines valuable light on other equally important aspects of Conner’s artistic persona: the felt-tip pen mandala drawings (1963 to 1971); the collages made from 19th century magazine engravings; and the inkblot pictures. Also on view in the ICA show are books, a tapestry, photos, a scaled-down light show and much memorabilia. Collectively they form a tantalizing snapshot of the artist’s multifaceted career, which in 2016 will be the subject of a full-scale retrospective at SFMOMA.

Different as those facets are from each other – and from all the other parts of the Conner oeuvre not on view at the ICA – the prints share certain characteristics. The most obvious are Conner’s penchant for “high density narrative,” “optical overload,” and “persistence of vision” — terms the artist used to describe his films. That sensibility also pervades just about everything else Conner did, and why any discussion of

his prints necessarily has to involve his films. Forerunners of the modern music video that subverted the structural conventions of filmmaking and mass media propagandizing, they were among the first to employ stroboscopic jump cuts: fast-paced barrages of recognizable imagery intercut with stretches of black leader and blinding white light. The idea was to pile up retinal “afterimages” that register subconsciously, forcing viewers to reconcile the seemingly incoherent pieces. That is what the brain does instinctively, and what filmmakers have always relied on to build or destroy narrative structure. Conner’s methods, as anyone who’s seen *A Movie* (1957) or *Cosmic Ray* (1961) can attest, was devastatingly effective for having stretched that capacity beyond what anyone thought possible.

The mandala drawings (1963-71) do something similar through different means. Echoing forms seen in religious art from many traditions, these dizzying topographies of interlinked marks connect in the manner of highly skewed labyrinths. They’re executed as all-over drawings. To look at them is to become lost in microscopic lines that form islands of positive and negative space. With no beginning and no end, they visualize infinity, making clear that infinity can’t be physically grasped, only grappled with. Thus, the question arises: how did Conner make these drawings? Drugs? Conner said his experiments were influential, but he never worked while high; he said it was impossible. So how, then, did he summon the superhuman concentration required? Evidence points back to his films. The image density and the rhythms correspond to the modulations of lightness and darkness seen in the mandalas. And while



The Dennis Hopper One Man Show, 1971, Vol. 1: No. 5

drawing and filmmaking are indisputably worlds apart, Conner's handling of them is of a piece conceptually — a point the ICA would have done well to make by screening one or two of them in the space it typically reserves for that purpose. As it stands, the mandala drawings, any one of which merit extended contemplation, are more than enough. Several dozen are on view and they occupy about a quarter of the available wall space — more if you count those that appear in the collaborative works made with McClure, those Conner converted to slides for light shows, and those he worked into his engraving collages.



The Dennis Hopper One Man Show, 1971, Vol. 1: No. 6

Conner created the latter between 1961 and 1967, and exhibited them in 1973 under the title *The Dennis Hopper One Man Show*. It was one of many feints and dodges he employed to deflect commercial pressures. The effort initially flummoxed his dealer. Who got paid if the work was sold? What if Hopper objected to the idea? And, more generally, how might an artist's work be valued if it carried another artist's name, particularly one who happened to also be an emerging Hollywood celebrity? Ultimately, the show went up at the James Willis Gallery in San Francisco, and the actor appeared at the opening, documented in a photo in which he and Conner are grinning broadly, as if in on a clever conspiracy.

These collages draw powerfully on the history of Dada and Surrealism, conjoining disparate imagery into fantastically inscrutable pictures that read as readymade visions captured whole rather than products of tedious handiwork. Conner made them by cutting up reproductions of engravings ripped from old magazines. While faint shadows are said to have existed at the seams in the originals, none are visible today. Conner removed them, first in photogravures, then later in digitally altered etchings. Eight are on view, along with a hardbound book, one of three volumes that together contain all 26 etchings from the series.

Conner defied conventions in many other ways. After being invited to make lithographs at the Tamarind Institute in 1965, he refused to sign them, insisting instead on applying an inky thumbprint. That violated not only established protocols, but cast aspersions on the technical capabilities of the press. It also, intentionally or not, forecast the epidemic of forgery that would rock the museum world in subsequent decades. In so doing he made a point: that while an artist's signature can be forged, his fingerprints cannot, thereby accruing value to a thumbprint. Having done that, he later resisted being fingerprinted for a teaching job at San Jose State, arguing, in 1974, that to submit would be tantamount to allowing a confiscation of his art without pay. (A compromise was eventually reached in which the artist agreed to create an editioned set of prints, one of which is displayed.) There were also elaborate pranks, like his mock run for supervisor in San Francisco during which he recited Biblical passages in a televised debate. Evidence of these provocations is well documented in *Somebody Else's Prints*.



Bruce Conner's fingerprints and Handprints

What ultimately carries the show though, are not the conceptual works, but those in which he challenged himself materially. None, perhaps, did so more than the inkblot prints: works in which the artist manufactured his own hieroglyphics by folding together inked pieces of paper. Each attempt yielded a unique Rorschach-like image, which, after practice, the artist learned to control. Later, Conner replicated the marks digitally,



Angel Wall, Canyon de Chelly, 2003/1976, inkjet print, 17.75 x 23.5"

creating a library of forms that could be cut and pasted over and over, concealing the evidence of their making. Conner printed the inkblots in taxonomic grids that seem to follow distinct patterns, forms that emulate family crests, snowflakes, shellfish fossils and cuneiform writing. With Photoshop at his command, Conner in the 1990s and the 2000s, like Jay DeFeo with scissors a photocopier in the 1970s, found that he could transpose imagery made in one media to another. It's the leitmotif that defined his career.

A great example is the photo of Canyon de Chelly over which Conner superimposed photograms, one of the rare instances where he worked in color. They come from the *Angel* series, spectral images made in the mid-1970s by placing his body on light-sensitive paper. The originals were printed at about life-size. These appear to be many times larger. "Projected" onto the water-stained red rock cliffs, they transform the photo from a tourist-exhausted landscape into one inhabited by ghosts. Overall, *Somebody Else's Prints* exerts a similar apparitional quality: that of a self-directed artist who refused to be pinned down, and whose legacy continues to cast long shadows in many directions.

—DAVID M. ROTH

"Bruce Conner: *Somebody Else's Prints*" @ [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#) through May 16, 2015.