

Arts

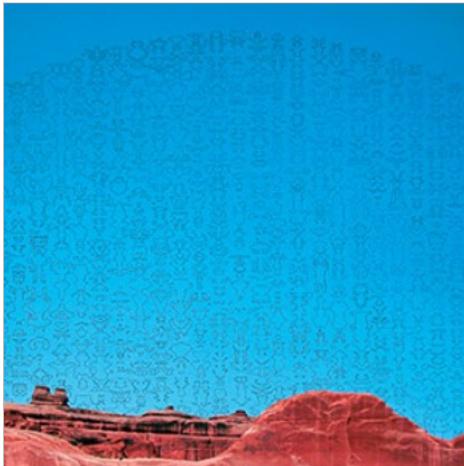


The Works of Bruce Conner at the SJ Institute of Contemporary Art



The works of Bruce Conner, who punked the art world elite, are on display at the SJICA

February 19, 2014 by Gary Singh



NO USE FOR A NAME: Iconoclastic artist Bruce Conner sometimes signed his work with a thumbprint or attributed it to others in a jab at the art collecting elite. 'Tracery in the Sky' is currently on display at the SJICA.

In Wichita they shut him down. The faculty just couldn't deal with him. The legendary artist Bruce Conner (1933-2008) barely even spent that much time at the University of Wichita (now Wichita State), but he was there during what now looks like an explosive kick off to a lucrative career upsetting the applegarts of authority. It was in Wichita in the early '50s that Conner and his crew organized provocative exhibitions that were stymied by the stuffed-shirt faculty within 48 hours.

As a result, he went west. San Francisco in 1957 provided all the Beat-era countercultural cross pollination Conner was looking for and from there he soon exploded into a multidisciplinary

artist—infiltrating every medium he could. He refused to let genres define him and throughout his career he conquered printmaking, experimental film, collage, photography, sculpture, light shows and assemblages.

"Bruce Conner: Somebody Else's Prints," currently on view at the [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#) (SJICA), is one of the first shows ever to focus primarily on Conner's printmaking, which often functioned as a crossover point for many of the ideas and themes addressed in his larger body of work. In a killer local connection, former San Jose Museum of Art Curator Jodi Throckmorton organized the show at the Ulrich Museum of Art in Wichita, where it debuted last year, before transplanting to SJICA. In all respects, it's a show one would normally see in a museum instead of a gallery. We now have a Conner-fueled Wichita-SJ nexus of self-renewal.

In fact, visitors may be hard pressed to identify a beginning or an end to the show, and that's a good thing. Upon entering or leaving the show, ICA patrons are prompted to share a thumbprint



on the wall facing the front door, in homage to the artist.

Conner occasionally used his fingerprint instead of actually signing a work, in order to ridicule the academics or the rockstar notoriety involved with Picasso types who can sign things, automatically increasing their value in the art world. The fingerprints on the ICA's join Conner's work as a gorgeous, graffiti-style attack on the institutionalized elitism of the art-collector nexus while simultaneously celebrating the artist's forte. Bravo!

Even better: right there at the front wall, in a glass case, rests a collection of hysterical correspondence between Conner and the SJSU Art Department in the early '70s. The university's administration had required Conner's fingerprints before allowing him to guest lecture at the university, apparently oblivious to his use of fingerprints to ridicule arts academia.

Of course, Conner is known for so much. He participated in innovative psychedelic light shows during the LSD-fueled nights of mid-'60s San Francisco. He created painfully detailed pen and ink depictions that definitely reflect that same era. He collaged found elements into various experimental films, unique for their time. In more parodies of notoriety and identity, he tracked down other people named Bruce Conner and asked for their help when he ran for political office.

In many cases, Conner collaborated with other troublemakers to create even more trouble. The show includes a project with fellow Kansan Dennis Hopper. Although the series of photogravures is Conner's work, he attributed the series to Hopper—once again, as a way to ridicule the entire concept of signed works, identity and notoriety. When Conner pulled the original stunt more than 40 years ago, the San Francisco gallery owner refused to go along with it at first, afraid the show would tarnish Hopper's reputation. But now, in San Jose, we get to see some of the original etchings, both framed on the wall and bound in hardcover books.

In yet another attempt to further Conner's satirical agenda posthumously, patrons can even phone in for explanations right there in the gallery, as they're walking around. Calling 408-213-4298, for example, connects the visitors to voices like that of Michael McClure, who collaborated with Conner on a deck of cards. With Conner's mandalas on one side and McClure's words on the other, the cards are dealt randomly to produce poems. In the phone message, McClure deals the cards and reads the resulting poems. It's so Zen-'60s-John Cagean, it'll make you weep. McClure also talks about going to high school with Conner in Wichita, plus the artist's famed light shows at the Fillmore and Avalon Ballroom in the '60s. All in all, a big thumbs up.

The exhibit runs through May 16.

Bruce Conner

Tue-Fri/Sat, 10am-5pm/12-5pm, Free

[San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#)

Find Art Events

[+ LIST YOUR EVENT](#)

Type: Area:



[Archives](#) | [About us](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Advertise with us](#)