Henry

VIEWPOINTS: *Untitled Prints by Bruce Conner*
November 10, 2018 – April 28, 2019

Viewpoints is a rotating series that highlights works from the Henry's collection, paired with commentary and insights from University of Washington faculty. By offering diverse perspectives across academic fields, the series encourages open inquiry and presents diverse ways of seeing and interpreting the art on view. This iteration of the series features a group of sixteen prints by Bruce Conner.

Installation views of *Viewpoints: Untitled Prints by Bruce Conner,* 2018, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle. Photo: Mark Woods.

Bruce Conner (U.S., 1933–2008)
Untitled, 1970
Works seen clockwise in gallery:
#116, edition 53/90, 2018.193
#209, edition 35/85, 2018.200
#210, edition 34/85, 2018.201
#113, edition 44/90, 2018.190
#114, edition 36/90, 2018.191
#126, edition 53/90, 2018.195
#201, edition 34/90, 2018.196
#202, edition 34/90, 2018.197
#115, edition 49/85, 2018.192
#117, edition 49/90, 2018.194
#301, #302, #303, edition 64/90, 2018.202.1-.3
#109, edition 56/90, 2018.189
#207, edition 38/85, 2018.198
#208, edition 38/85, 2018.199
Offset lithographs
Henry Art Gallery, gift of the Conner Family Trust, San Francisco

This *Viewpoints* rotation features a group of offset lithographs by the influential post-World War II artist Bruce Conner (U.S., 1933–2008). Known for working across media, including collage and film, painting and sculpture, Conner made the works on view in 1970, reinterpreting in print form densely patterned, all-over, felt-tip pen drawings that he made between 1964 and 1969. The felt-tip pen, then relatively new to the market, behaved unpredictably—some of the drawings faded or turned purple in tone. In response to the ephemeral quality of these drawings, Conner transformed approximately seventy-five of them into archival prints. More than copies of the original drawings, the prints are the result of an intentional process to enhance the line quality and accentuate the visually oscillating effect of the marks. Produced in numbered editions of up to 90, these prints also held the potential to alleviate Conner's notably strapped financial circumstance at the time.

The resulting prints visually vibrate and entrance the eye as they evoke both macro and micro scales—a view into the cosmos and the cellular dimension, simultaneously. Transfixing the eye, these prints prompt up-close, extended viewing that mirrors Conner's hyper-focused, durational process of making the initial drawings as well as his own exploration of a personal experience of vision. Infinitely broad and minutely detailed, they center the act of perception itself and exemplify Conner's interest in awakening consciousness, in his art and life, which was influenced by such significant social and political conditions as the Cold War and the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s. A recurring motif in these works and throughout Conner's career is the Mandala, a Sanskrit word for circle and a ritual symbol in Eastern religions used as a tool to facilitate meditation.

Conner numbered these prints with ideas of sequential visual experience, and the effects of reading images in proximity, in mind; those prints numbered in the one hundreds are singular; those in the two-hundreds are pairs; those in the three-hundreds are sets of three, and so on.

FACULTY CONTRIBUTIONS

The Space Between
Shannon Cram
Assistant Professor, School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, UW Bothell

Bruce Conner's prints require a physical closeness to appreciate their detail. They invite you to lean in and squint, to stand nose to page and brush the image with your breath. In this intimate geography, they pose a deceptively simple question: what do you see?

I see movement and overspill, a rippling vibration that unsettles my sense of scale: am I looking at whorls of magnified skin or the desert landscape from above? More than anything else, though, I see the spaces between Conner's careful markings. I see a presence radiating from beneath the ink, an underglow seeping through its cracks.

Conner created these images during an era of nuclear anxiety in the United States, a theme that often haunted his work. Atomic development initiated new forms of hyper-visuality: x-rays that made flesh transparent on film, weapons that envisioned a collective, planetary end. At the same time, however, fallout from nuclear production and testing challenged the scope and consequence of what could be seen. As Conner worked, American scientists traveled the globe documenting the extent of the bomb's invisible hazards. They found byproducts from atomic weapons in milk bottles and on rooftops, in puddles of rain and baby teeth, beer and bones. Their findings confirmed that the residues of war persisted, unevenly, in everyone on earth. Conner's prints are animated by this sense of relation—the way that bodies and environments, ink and page, bring each other into focus.

Ground Zero
Beverly Naidus
Associate Professor, School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, UW Tacoma

As a socially engaged artist, I am intrigued by how differently artists can interpret various threats, traumas, and experiences. Bruce Conner came of age at a time when nuclear weapons were being developed, tested, and used in warfare. In the decades following World War II, there was a significant threat of nuclear confrontation as world powers stockpiled these weapons. Because of the persistent failure of those powers to disarm, potential "ground zeroes" still exist everywhere.

How did Conner process his understanding of mass death without being swallowed up by despair? How did he create some spaciousness in his daily life? I can see him sitting down with the new technology of the felt-tip pen, carefully weaving together tiny marks as a meditation. Perhaps the obsessive meticulousness of this practice allowed him to detach from intense emotions while grounding within them, a creative process both concrete and transcendent. The patterns offer a soothing rhythm of repetition: in breath, out breath, one mark laid down after another. Conner could enter the blast zone, sort through a world of ashes, organize them like crystals and scales, and herald a rebirth of sorts.

I am large, I contain multitudes

Jennifer Nemhauser
Professor and Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Faculty Scholar, Department of Biology

When I look at these prints by Bruce Conner, I am reminded of how every tree, every corn plant, every weed growing by the side of the road is not really an individual, but a rather improbable assemblage of millions of cells. Among these cells, there are hundreds of distinct shapes and abilities, and, collectively, these individual cells enable complex traits like calculating the precise amount of energy reserves required for the plant to survive each night.

In these prints, I see the artist assembling a multitude of marks and producing complex and unexpected patterns, many of which remind me of the ones I see every day. Is this a sliver of a tree trunk with a wound being repaired and remodeled? Is this a section of a root with multiple specialized cell types growing around one another? Is it a microbial mat at a deep ocean vent, poised at the precipice between individual and collective identities? In my lab, we work to uncover how rules that operate at the molecular and cellular scale shape the fate of the whole organism. Every mark made by the artist constrained the ultimate form of the piece. I wonder: what rules did he discover or impose during his investigation?