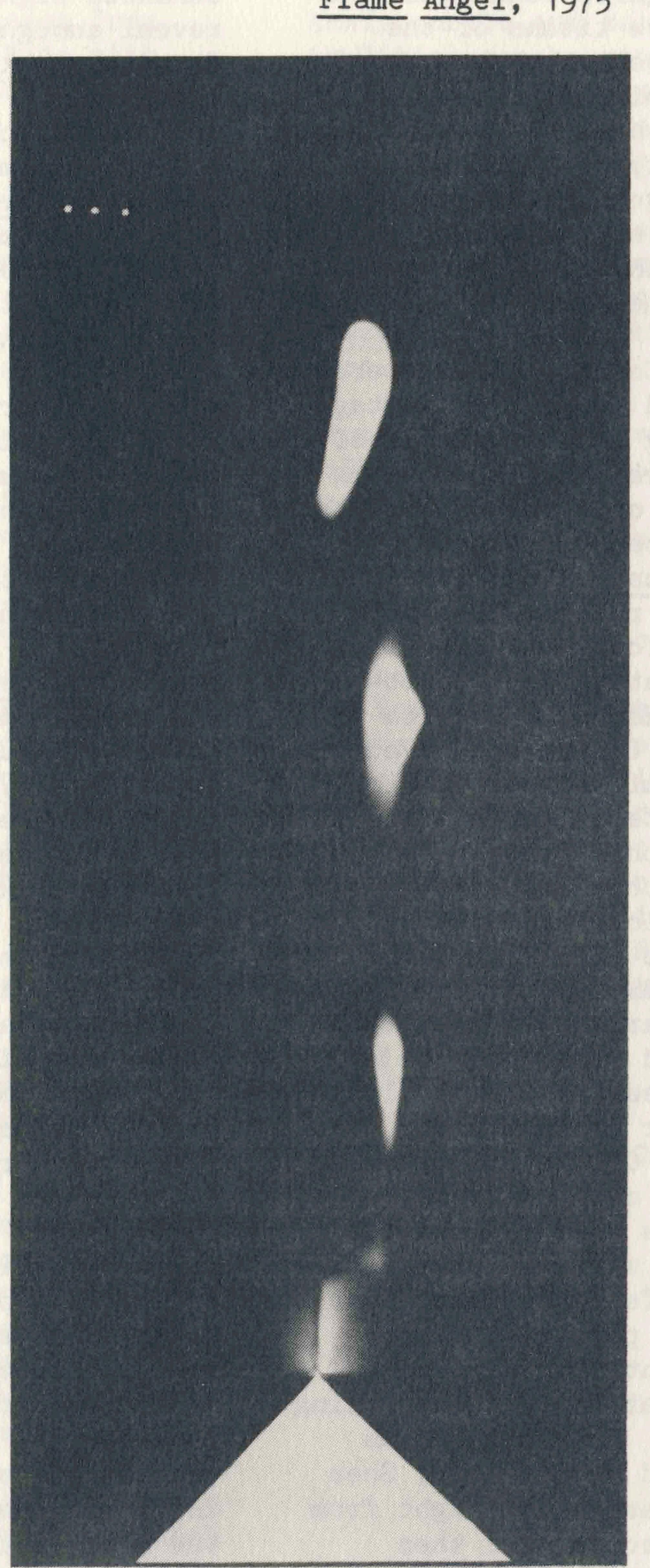
Bruce Conner MATRIX/BERKELEY 102 University Art Museum mid-December - early February 1987

Flame Angel, 1975



Bruce Conner is one of those few artists who are fully accomplished in more than one medium. Yet there are still those who are familiar with Conner's pivotal role in the "beat" era of Northern California art, his sculptures and collages acquired by museums around the world, yet have never seen one of his films. And devotees of experimental film who recognize Conner as one of the few titans of the small screen are unaware of the sweeping variety of his plastic works. The prolific complexity of his creativity resists generalization, but there is an obsessive, risktaking, inventiveness that drives them all.

Most of Conner's films were assembled from found footage, bypassing his direct use of the camera. His photograms were not only cameraless, but reached back into antiquity and the camera obscura (Latin for dark room) of the 16th century for their execution. Collaborating with photographer Edmund Shea from 1972 to 1975, Conner conceived of making full-scale, contact bodyprints on large rolls of photographic paper. For Conner, this was more autobiographical performance sculpture than simply another graphic experiment. Within a small, dark room, with the unexposed paper hung on a wall, Shea operated a slide projector as the light source. Conner, nude and standing on a platform, would press his body against the paper in various poses, while a red safelight filter over the lens permitted him to experiment with different configurations without making a print. When Conner was satisfied with a pose, Shea would flash white light from the projector, and then

develop the roll of paper.
Where Conner's body, or other objects, occluded the light, the finished print shows them as white patterns on black.
The rectangular wooden platform is seen as a pyramid, and Conner's body takes on abstract anthropomorphisms where it blocked the darkness.

The finished photograms are lifescale, spirituallyenhanced signatures. They reveal enough of the human form to speak for our frail mortality in the universe, and that wispy burst of energy that may endure. Untitled Angel demonstrates how the surfaces of the prints, rather than being mere silhouettes, are subtly textured with gradations of light like a view from the ocean's floor. Kiss Angel shows the faint ghost of an image, punctuated with the points of contact of mouth and fingers. Angel Kiss is the most cruciform in pattern, with elbows, two finger-dots, and the open mouth. Flame Angel, with its side view, yields more of the complete figure. In the later Angels, the abstractness of Conner's more varied contacts ascend to images that seem like fireflies, and then abandon scale entirely to unite with the galaxies.

Conner has made drawings throughout his career. While engaged in the creation of sculptures, collages or films, Conner would have periods when he concentrated on drawing. Exploring the infinite variety of marking on a finite page, he could devote months working obsessively on one, complex drawing. Rather than the rendering of form, his drawing has sought the development and refinement of the intense density of

variable texture. Conner's approach to drawing is sculptural in its direct working of the materials. His choices of markers-pencil, felt-tip, Pelikan ink--and surfaces--Japanese papers, a drum, and even a globe -- have been combined to develop layered areas. These six drawings were completed from July 27 and October 6, 1974, between work on the photograms. Like the photograms, they progress from light to dark. Made with Pelikan ink on BFK rag paper, each drawing has a different variation on the overlapping and layering of ink. The first drawing ("July 27, 1974") is patterned with white dots surrounded by black, like galactic nebulae, with an organic gentleness to it. In "July 31," the ink is layered in ripples, with a dusting of white dots. The black layers of ink reflect the grained sheen of charred wood. The layering then becomes more linear ("August 18"). In "August 30," lines of overlap become more regular, and almost geometric. "October 1" has diamond forms faintly superimposed over the louvre-like overlapping bands. In the sixth and last ("October 6"), the linear bands are gone. The ink has formed a swirled, watered, and almost geological pattern of black, with a few white dots distributed in the upper left. The patterns in the drawings will vary, depending on the direction of the light and the viewer's eyeline. Why hadn't Conner simply applied white ink on black backgrounds to achieve the same designs? No white ink would remain stable, nor yield the pure brightness of the original paper.

The photograms and the drawings share an elusiveness

to reproducibility. Their surfaces are so variable, and light so fugitive in reflection, that no photograph is able to capture their essences. The installation environment constructed especially for this exhibit allows these works to be perceived in ways closest to the artist's intentions. With the illuminated photograms and drawings surrounded by a volume of darkness, their subtle and subjective qualities can be sensed in a theatrical atmosphere, with varying thresholds of perception experienced as one's eyes adjust. The viewer entering this space is, in a sense, communing with that original camera obscura where the photographs were conceived.

Bruce Conner was born in McPherson, Kansas, in 1933. He received his B.A. from the University of Nebraska in 1956 and studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and the University of Colorado. He moved to the Bay Area in 1957 with his wife painter Jean Conner and immediately became involved with the thriving art and poetry scene in San Francisco, which included Wally Hedrick, Jay de Feo, George Herms, Joan Brown, Michael McClure, Larry Jordan, and Robert Duncan, among others.

Tony Reveaux Writer, Editor and Critic

## Works in MATRIX:

Drawings: lent by the artist, courtesy Smith Andersen Gallery, Palo Alto, 22 x 20-1/2" (unframed), Pelikan ink on BFK paper.

- 1. July 27, 1974.
- 2. July 31, 1974.
- 3. August 18, 1974.
- 4. August 30, 1974.
- 5. October 1, 1974.
- 6. October 6, 1974.

Photograms: made with Edmund Shea, 1975, lent by Fraenkel Gallery, S. F.; dimensions are for unframed works.

- 1. Angel, 85 x 39".
- 2. Untitled Angel, 67 x 40".
- 3. Flame Angel, 96 x 40".
- 4. Untitled Angel, 96 x 40".
- 5. Angel Kiss, 96 x 40".
- 6. Kiss Angel, 96 x 40".

Museum, Berkeley, CA, Funk Art, '67 (catalogue); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Sculpture of the 60s, '67 (catalogue); Dallas Museum of Art, TX, Poets of the Cities, '75 (catalogue); Musee National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Paris/New York, '77 (catalogue); The Oakland Museum, CA, 100 Years of California Sculpture, '82 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Biennial, '82 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art, '84 (catalogue); Museum Ludwig, Cologne, W. Germany, Europa/Amerika, '86 (catalogue).

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Alan Gallery, NY, '60; Batman Gallery, S.F., '60; Ferus Gallery, L.A., '62. Robert Fraser Gallery, London, '65; Institute of Contemporary Art, Phila. '67 (catalogue); San Francisco Art Institute, 171; Martha Jackson Gallery, N.Y., '72; Quay Gallery, S.F., '74; M.H. de Young Museum, S.F., '74 (catalogue); Smith Andersen Gallery, Palo Alto, CA, '83, '86; Fraenkel Gallery, S.F., '83, '86; The Art Museum Association of America, S.F., Bruce Conner: Photograms, '85 (traveled, catalogue).

Selected group exhibitions:

The Museum of Modern Art, NY,
The Art of Assemblage, '61
(catalogue); University Art

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Reveaux, Anthony. Bruce Conner (St. Paul: Walker Art Center, 1981) (films).

Plagens, Peter.

Sunshine Muse: Contemporary

Art on the West Coast (N.Y.:

Praeger, '74).

Albright, Thomas. Art in the San Francisco Bay

Area, 1945-1980: An

Illustrated History
(Berkeley: UC Press, '85).

Selz, Peter. Art in a Turbulent Era (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, '85).

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