

Looking for Mushrooms: Bruce and Jean Conner in Mexico, 1961-1962

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS: BRUCE AND JEAN CONNER IN MEXICO, 1961-1962

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American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center • Washington, DC

Jean and Bruce Conner were both born in 1933, Jean in Lincoln, Nebraska and Bruce in Wichita, Kansas. She earned her BFA at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1955 and MFA from the University of Colorado Boulder, 1957. Bruce transferred from the University of Wichita to Lincoln, graduating a year after Jean. He joined her in Boulder, and they married in Lincoln the next September.

That same day they flew to San Francisco to join other Midwest emigrants in what became the Beat Generation. From 1961 until 1965, they moved between Mexico City, Wichita, and the Boston area before returning to San Francisco. Bruce passed away in 2008. Jean still lives and works in their house in the Glen Park neighborhood.

Bruce actively populated the California beat, psychedelic, and punk subcultures with an enormous body of changing and challenging work in many media, compiling an international museum exhibition record of hundreds of solo and group shows.

Jean raised their son Robert, quietly pursuing her practice of collaging images from women's magazines into subtly surreal compositions. Her public exhibitions and acquisitions suddenly blossomed after American University Museum's 2015 show of her and Bruce's collages into long-overdue recognition from prominent museums.



Jean Conner, *YOUTH*, 1961. Graphite on paper, 6 13/16 x 3 7/8 in. Courtesy of a private collection.



Bruce Conner, *SKETCH FOR A RELIEF SCULPTURE*, 1961. Graphite on paper, 9 9/16 x 10 in. Courtesy of the Conner Family Trust, San Francisco.

Cover: Bruce Conner, *HONGO*, 1962. Ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 in. Courtesy of a private collection.
Inside flap: Jean Conner, *UNTITLED*, 1962. Graphite on paper, 25 3/4 x 19 3/4 in. Courtesy of a private collection.
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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM
AT THE KATZEN ARTS CENTER

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American University Museum

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Design: Lloyd Greenberg Design, LLC

INTRODUCTION

Bruce and Jean Conner’s trip from San Francisco to Mexico started with a bit of mischief. Very early in the morning of September 9, 1961, Bruce and a friend stenciled LOVE over the existing SLOW painted on the pavement in front of their Oak Street building. After municipal workers covered it with black paint, the morning traffic wore that off and LOVE reappeared. With this positive omen, later that day the Conners started the drive to his family home in Wichita.

The good vibes didn’t last long. After a brief visit abruptly ended in a late-night, alcohol-fueled fight with his father, they drove to Mexico City, renting an apartment conveniently near the tourist zone where many residents spoke English.

Bruce left the U.S. to escape both the threat of nuclear attack and the pressures of what he considered a phony art world by living cheaply in Mexico and selling his work through his New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco galleries. Unfortunately, the capital city proved to be too expensive for their limited resources, especially since nothing of his sold either there or back in the States. Shortly before Thanksgiving, 1962, Jean and their five-week old son Robert flew home, while Bruce drove to Wichita in their station wagon crammed full of artwork. It broke down at the border so, with money wired by his dad, he had it towed across and repaired.

However, while in Mexico, the two artists made the most of their new circumstances despite such obstacles and setbacks. Without a ready supply of junk for Bruce’s assemblages—in Mexico trash was potential cash—he collaged the local brightly colored papers. More significantly, free from the fear, anger, and darkness that characterized his most controversial work in America, he turned from external social and political events to the internal and personal and found that drawing was better suited to what needed to be expressed. Jean’s pregnancy and the challenges of approaching parenthood deepened his introspection, as did his avid ingestion of psychotropic plants. He drew mountainous dreamscapes of Meso-American pyramids teeming with evidence of a young man’s struggle with maturity.

For her part, Jean no longer had access to the slick advertisements in American women’s magazines with which she had constructed slyly surreal collages during the previous few years. She also concentrated on drawing, taking positive, quiet inspiration from aspects of the surrounding culture: the luxuriant floral memorial wreaths, the rich ornaments of the churches, amusing novelties like circus magicians and, of course, her charismatic husband.

BY ROBERT CONWAY



Bruce Conner, *LOVE ON OAK STREET*, 1961, 1961. Color photograph, 2 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. Courtesy of the Conner Family Trust, San Francisco.

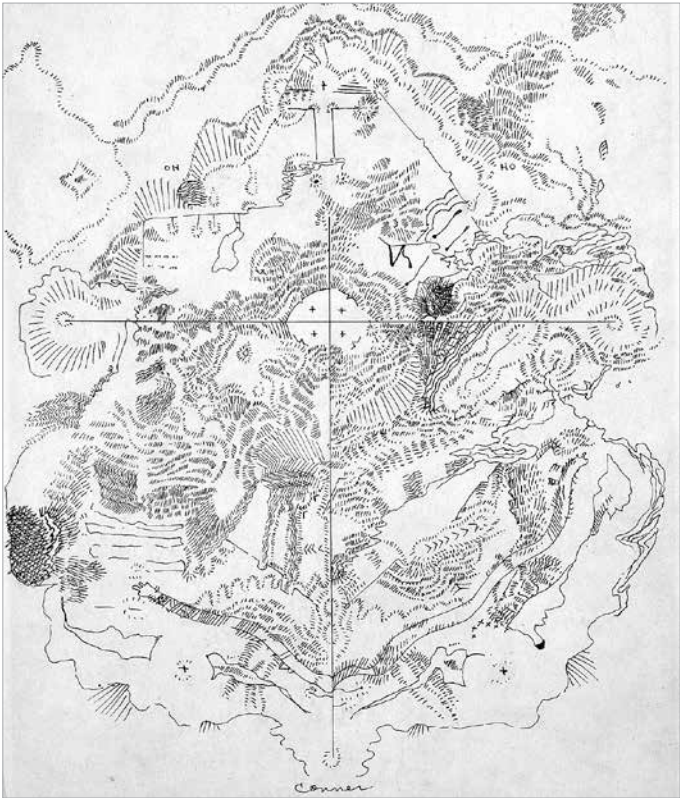


Jean Conner, *BRUCE*, 1962–1974. Photo and paper collage on paper, 10 x 10 in. Courtesy of Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco.

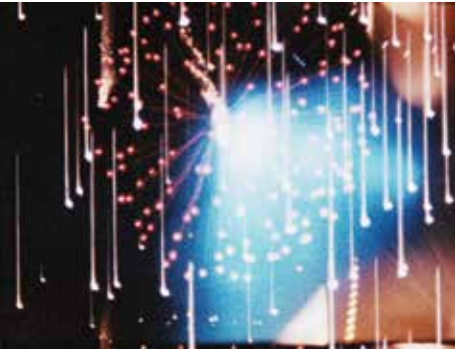
During the year in Mexico, Bruce kept a running correspondence with Charles Alan, his patient and supportive New York dealer whose advice helped him negotiate exhibitions with two local galleries and eventually to manage a career as a fiercely independent artist. Alan’s practical notes on packing, shipping, insurance, customs, cash advances, sales commissions and, most of all, his willingness to care for what Bruce sent were instrumental in preserving the vulnerable sheets of paper now on exhibition more than sixty years later.



Jean Conner, *UNTITLED*, 1962. Graphite on paper, 12 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. Courtesy of Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco.



Bruce Conner, *UNTITLED*, 1962. Ink on paper, 10 1/2 x 8 in. Courtesy of a private collection.



Bruce Conner, stills from *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS 1959–67/1996*, 16mm to 35mm blow-up, color, sound, 14.5 min. Digitally restored, 2016. Courtesy of the Conner Family Trust, San Francisco and Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles.

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS

BY KERRY BROUGHER

As the Cold War world moves absurdly towards its inevitable apocalyptic end in Bruce Conner’s 1958 found-footage film, *A MOVIE*, there is a hint of a possible escape hatch in the last shot as a diver ascends through the ocean toward the light above. Conner likely identified with this potential survivor. “In those years,” recalled his wife, artist Jean Conner, “there were a lot of bomb shelters being built and air-raid drills at the schools.... It all got to Bruce... (he) figured that Mexico City would be a safe place to live...”¹

In 1961, the two “escaped” to Mexico for over a year. Life there was challenging, and both artists shifted primarily to drawing out of necessity. With their faint, delicate lines, many of Bruce and Jean’s Mexican drawings are nearly imperceptible, suggesting tentative new ideas were taking shape. As might be expected, the artists’ work was influenced by Mexican culture and iconography, including hearts, crosses, serpents, angels, the Virgin, and pyramids, but these tentatively defined images often transform, mutate, and meld into one another in ways that create a mind-altering sense of other-worldliness. Mexican culture stimulated such visions: “I would go by an auto repair garage,” reported Bruce, “and in the midst of the greasy tools and objects on the wall would be a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe. A picture of the Virgin. Right next to it might be a monkey wrench, and an electric lightbulb, and plastic flowers, and a pinup of a half-naked girl!”²

Jean’s work often focuses on the body soaring, clearly seen in an untitled piece from 1962 in which a magician surrounded by serpents levitates a woman. *FLYING LADY* (1961) and *UNTITLED* (1962) both have winged elements, possibly suggesting angels, but the latter piece is a complex intertwining of feathery shapes and a facial profile that cloak organic forms resembling internal organs and arteries; these, in turn, seem to cradle the vague suggestion of an infant. Here, Angel, Virgin, and Mother have merged and been turned inside out. Jean gave birth to their son Robert in Mexico, which is certainly hinted at in these works as well as in Bruce’s *EMBRYO* (1962). Other works involving various forms of the body grapple with more universal issues of alchemical amalgamation, such as Jean’s untitled 1962 drawing of a serpent curling to shelter skeletal forms overlaid with a hand conjuring a geometric flower.

Much of the artists’ work in Mexico is undoubtedly inspired by experiments consuming psilocybin mushrooms. Bruce had taken peyote in San Francisco, traveling “into new territory, then coming back and making a report.”³ In Mexico, Bruce and Jean participated in mushroom ceremonies, and Bruce and Harvard professor and psychedelics sage Timothy Leary, whom they had met there, searched for *Psilocybes* near Oaxaca. Bruce also ingested mushrooms during a trip to explore newly found ruins, which resulted, according to his traveling companion, Walter Hopps, in visions of “winged beings coming after him...”⁴ The effects of psilocybin are particularly notable in Bruce’s landscape drawings. In his rendition of a caterpillar in the 1962 *HONGO*, inspired by Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the mushroom seems animated with radioactive emanations while faces turn into abstract forms resembling maps, suggesting we are viewing the scene from the ground and the air simultaneously. A similar effect is used in *UNTITLED (MEXICO)* from 1962, in which crosses appear in a landscape but also as symbolic forms, as if on a flat chart.

Their brief sojourn in Mexico affected both artists’ later work. After their return, Jean turned primarily to collage, producing over the years a powerful group of feminist works inspired by nature and the body. Bruce stopped making assemblages and focused more on drawing, emphasizing dense, obsessive, all-over mark-making and quasi-mystical abstraction to create dark cosmic visions. The memories of Mexico influenced these new pieces and were kept alive more directly in Bruce’s hallucinogenic film *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, which he worked on until 1967 and reworked in 1996. Shot in color while on his mushroom-hunting expeditions, which he combined with previous material filmed in San Francisco, the work, with its rapid cutting and flickering multiple exposures, is a hypnotic, kaleidoscopic travelogue. *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* ultimately distills the Conners’ brief stay in Mexico, a transitional time of “dropping out,” searching, expanding consciousness, and artistic renewal.

¹ Excerpts from interviews between Jean Conner and Robert Conway in *Jean Conner: Collage* (San José: San José Museum of Art, 2022), 157–158.
² Bruce Conner quoted in Rachel Federman “Bruce Conner: Fifty Years in Show Business,” in *Bruce Conner: It’s All True* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2016) 86.
³ Bruce Conner quoted in Thomas Crow, *The Artist in the Counter-Culture: Bruce Conner to Mike Kelley and Other Tales from the Edge* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023) 23.
⁴ Walter Hopps quoted in *ibid.*, 43.