

Might As Well Jump: Bruce Conner's Mabuhay Photographs

Timothy Buckwalter | Nov 17, 2007 | KQED Arts

Whenever someone asks me that age-old question "Who do you like better, Elvis or The Beatles?" I always answer the Dead Kennedys.

I'm not gonna deny that part of the reason I say it is to be a jerk. But I mean, really, if I have to pick music that zenithed awhile ago, the snotty self-righteousness of Jello Biafra and crew gets my vote.

Fortunately for the Bay Area, BAM/PFA recently announced their purchase of 53 photographs by San Francisco's Bruce Conner -- two portfolios of images from his Mabuhay Gardens series. Shot in 1977-78 and printed in 1985 and 2004, the series came out of his contributions to V. Vale's punk rag Search and Destroy.

The photos capture all that beer swill, those skuzzy photocopied fliers, homemade haircuts and second hand clothing, all the while exuding that manic joy of togetherness and the messy physicality that is punk.

It's all there in Conner's photographs. The sniggering women in the bathroom. The exhausted couples leaning in and whispering. There's Roz Rezabek, Negative Trend's lead singer, sweat-soaked in mid-air, seemingly shot out of a Howitzer.

We wanted to touch, to connect with each other, to express ourselves -- frustrated and elated - - through our bodies. At a Suicidal Tendencies show, a fellow slammed into my ribs so hard I had trouble breathing for a few days, but when I toppled over in pain, two others picked me up and carried me out. Another time, at a Ramones show, a burly guy mashed his elbow into my roommate's face causing her to bite through part of her tongue. I hailed a taxi to get her to the ER -- eight stitches in her tongue.

Speaking about the series awhile back, Conner said he had "always liked the idea of action photos. Like -- sports events... or combat photography."

The Conner series is perfect for the East Bay, where elements of the counterculture linger on. After all Berkeley is the still home to 924 Gilman. Unfortunately BAM/PFA will not be putting the series on view until May 2008.

In the meantime, let's start bugging SFMOMA to rehang some pieces from Conner's stunning Angel series. The life-size photograms, made in collaboration with Edmund Shea only a few years before the Mabuhay series, are ethereal images of Conner's own body floating on a black background -- goth before Robert Smith had The Cure.

But if you need a fix immediately, head over to Gallery Paule Anglim and see Works. The show, running through November 24, 2007, features selection from 40 years' worth of Bruce Conner's drawings, paintings collages, tapestries and sculptures.