

# hosfelt gallery

5 September – 14 October 2023

Reception: Saturday September 9, 3-5pm, with a curatorial tour at 3pm

## **BRUCE CONNER & JESS** **The Virtue of Uncertainty**

Two of the most original and broad-ranging 20<sup>th</sup> century American artists — Bruce Conner (1933-2008) and Jess (1923-2004) — are brought together in a presentation of more than 60 artworks to call attention to common, repeating motifs and intentions in the work of these puzzle-making geniuses.

Though two extremely different personalities, both artists were iconoclasts who relocated to the Bay Area (Jess in 1948; Conner in 1957) to escape their stifling, middle-class upbringing. They came for creative, intellectual, and social freedom, and became members of tight-knit communities of artists, poets, and musicians with low expectations about the commercial viability of their art and a consequent inclination toward radical experimentation.

Central to both Conner and Jess — for conceptual -- as well as financial -- reasons — was the practice of scavenging for the raw materials of art making. By re-claiming objects, images, language, even thrift shop paintings, then re-assessing, re-arranging, re-painting and re-contextualizing them, they alchemically transformed the everyday into talismanic artworks, loaded with potential meaning. Stylistically, these works often had a sense of fracture and repair... of a shattered world order, re-assembled to reveal long-hidden truths.

Because they're pieced together from recognizable images or objects, viewers are induced to engage, thinking they'll be able to decode these fetishistic artworks, and hoping to discover the artists' answers to existential mysteries. But Jess and Conner were both riddle masters, whose intent was to confound. They exploited the space between familiarity and uncertainty, requiring their audience to untangle their symbols, connotations, and dark humor, knowing that in the process of deciphering, you, the viewer, unwittingly become a collaborator in the making of meaning.

Gathered from private collections and the estates of the artists, many of the paintings, drawings, collages and sculptures in this show have never been publicly exhibited.

Born in 1933 in McPherson, Kansas, **Bruce Conner** experimented in painting, filmmaking, assemblage, collage, drawing, photography, printmaking, performance and conceptual projects over the course of a six-decade career. His work has been exhibited in and collected by major museums throughout the world, most recently and completely in the retrospective exhibition and major catalogue of his work, *It's All True*, which was presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

**Jess** (Burgess Collins) was born in Long Beach, California in 1923. He abandoned a career in science (he worked on the Manhattan Project, producing plutonium for nuclear bombs) to move to San Francisco and study at the California School of Fine Arts (later renamed San Francisco Art Institute) in 1948. The next year, he met the poet Robert Duncan, with whom he had a romantic and sometimes collaborative

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relationship until Duncan's death in 1988. Jess's work has been exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Art Institute of Chicago and The Whitney Museum of American Art. His work is included in the permanent collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, as well as many others.

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