

NEW YORK

Bruce Conner Paula Cooper Gallery

Nowhere does the art world get more bollixed up than with video. A performance needs to be experienced in person. And, despite the thumbnail reign of Instagram, painting and sculpture should really be seen in art's own space-time continuum. But does that really make sense for video? Isn't the ideal place to sit and contemplate a challenging, experimental stew of images and narratives your bed rather than a hard wooden bench in a gallery? Just hearing a blithe gallerina say, "There's a video downstairs," can make my stomach sink. God forbid they just put the damn thing on YouTube! It's like someone insisting on a phone call when you know a text would do.

So when I heard, on an icy January winter night in Chelsea, that Paula Cooper Gallery's upstairs annex was showing Bruce Conner's *Three Screen Ray*—a special 2006 version of his landmark 1961 video *Cosmic Ray* that had been reedited to play across a trio of screens, each iteration differently cut and all whirring away like a slot machine—I was intrigued but not excited. But this was January, when the art world does what restaurants do on Mondays: hash group shows together like mystery croquettes or mount microspectives of all that aged beef in the back.

So Bruce Conner started looking good. Plus, would five or so minutes kill me?

In fact, it brought me back to life. I hadn't laid eyes on *Cosmic Ray* in years—maybe decades—and had never seen the three-screen version. But the shower of Conner's unique lightning-fast imagery across different frames scatters the work even further, making it impossible to experience it the same way twice—and not a syncing feeling in sight.

For those unfamiliar with the original *Cosmic Ray*, it's something else: five minutes and thirty rapid-fire seconds of glorious high-contrast black-and-white à-go-go. In this piece, set to one of the greatest hits of the twentieth century (Ray Charles's brilliant 1959 showstopper "What'd I Say," an improvised concert song that became the singer's first number-one hit on the R&B chart in the United States), Conner gives us topless babes shaking it on 16 mm enmeshed with proto-experimental geometric fantasias, glossy hair-care commercials, fireworks, and other forms of American agitprop, all of which culminates in sexed-up money shots of tanks and guns blowing their blasting caps. Is it any wonder Mickey Mouse looks so confused when the cannon goes limp?

Three Screen Ray is deliriously orgiastic—it felt like an amphetamine-fueled vision that needed to be swallowed whole. But at home,

watching the video repeatedly on my laptop while in bed, I started to appreciate its deliberate rhythm and structure. It's really more of a cleverly conceived striptease than a raucous, topless trip-out, as it starts with a frustratingly long yet utterly coy introduction of old-school film countdown leaders that keep approaching zero before resetting, over and over again. Then, even as Conner's phantasmagoria taunts you with flesh and soothes you with pyrotechnics, it ratchets up to a series of ordnance-laden climaxes. These are not splatter diagrams; Conner isn't just a Cuisinart mood processor. Ultimately, this narrative strategy inverts the long tease into a kind of fairy tale, a Red Riding Hood story that begins innocently enough (or as innocently as old blue filmstrips ever begin) while slowly and subliminally implicating the viewer as the wolf, making *Three Screen Ray* a form of aversion and perversion therapy. It's been argued that the original *Cosmic Ray* was the first music video (BTWRIPMTV), but that really understates its achievement. It's so much more: a beautiful, subtle, and ingenious reminder that subversion works its magic best when disguised as an enthralling lure.

So, with respect to the galleries, which after the year-end bacchanals understandably deserve a break, maybe they could rethink January not as a cynical Bistro Monday for art hash and old stock but as the original month of Epiphany, primed with new ideas and novel approaches that, like so much of Conner's still-underrated multigenre output, are worth reviving. I'll start with my video-at-home initiative. If you want to watch *Three Screen Ray* in bed, text me. I made a copy.

—David Colman

Kiki Smith 125 Newbury

The mood was dark in "The Moon Watches the Earth," an exhibition that brought Kiki Smith's work from the early '90s into proximity with her more recent output. The presentation, divided between two visually independent spaces, contributed to the show's psychological complexity and delivered a progressively immersive experience: First, you got lost in the midnight reverie staged in the outer gallery; then you entered the shock theater in the back and got lost all over again in contemplation of your own mortality.

In the front space, Smith's meditations on life and temporality were threaded with wonder at the ineffability of the natural world. Imaginatively speaking, we would have been in total darkness were it not for the huge, full moon (*Wooden Moon*, 2022) that loomed large on the

Bruce Conner,
Three Screen Ray,
2006, three-channel
video, black-and-
white, sound,
5 minutes 16 seconds.

