

The Original Dis-Man

Robbie Conal is moving from the streets into new territory with a solo show, a book, "Dis-Arm" and other typically political works

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

Robbie Conal is doing his job as an artist.

"I'm worrying," he says. After eight years of what he calls "non-sanctioned public expression"—meaning Jesse Helms as the "Artificial Art Official" and other notorious posters of politicians—Conal goes somewhat legit this month. A solo exhibition of his politically oriented art is at the Koplin Gallery in Santa Monica through Nov. 14, and Harper Perennial has published his autobiography-cum-manifesto: "Art Attack: The Midnight Politics of a Guerrilla Artist."

The 48-year-old Conal's hair is graying, but he displays the energy and the wardrobe of a teenager, with a revolving supply of T-shirts, jeans and running shoes. A short, irrepressible character, Conal has an infectious love for banter and the determination of a terrier. In the countdown to the elections and in the wake of studies revealing new despair in the inner city, he feels the pressure to perform.

As he is fond of quipping: "So many bad guys, so little time."

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Conal paces the gallery floor waiting for the delivery of his most recent work, a 6-by-6-foot photomural of a police nightstick set aflame between the texts *Dis* and *Arm*.

"My idea is that those nightsticks were the match. When they struck Rodney [King], they lit up the city," says Conal, in his practiced pattern of rapid speech. "It's a symptom of very deep class division in American culture that has been accelerated by 12 years of Republican rule and the systematic dismantling of federal welfare and education programs."

"Dis-Arm" is a symbol for Conal of a new direction in his work. This is his first large-scale work using photography and computers instead of the expressively painted portraits for which he is known. He credits this change in part to his wife of two years, graphic designer Debbie Ross.

When she walks into the gallery, Conal becomes puppyish and animated. They met at the left-leaning Christic Institute four years ago and worked together on the poster "Contra Cocaine." He is eager to explain that she did the type for "Dis-Arm" and that they now work together at what he

Please see Page 76



BOB CAREY / Los Angeles Times

Robbie Conal

Continued from Page 3

calls "kitchen-table graphics." Ross, a striking brunette, designed his new book as well.

Conal turns serious as he explains the history of "Dis-Arm." Gallery owner Allen Koplin, who died suddenly last month, suggested that he would fund any work of art that Conal might make in response to the riots and exhibit it at the gallery he owned with his wife, Marty. Conal confides: "He was a large part of the spirit behind the piece, and he never got to see it. But that kind of support is the reason I'm here."

The piece is a symbol of Conal's recent focus on L.A. politics as well. "To take on the local power structure, that's a big deal. You get more action out of thinking globally and acting locally," he says.

He used photography and collage last spring to create a poster of Daryl F. Gates on a shooting target captioned with the former police chief's shocking words "casual drug users ought to be taken out and shot," with the last word crossed out and replaced with *beat-en*.

"That Gates poster caused more heat for me than anything I've done," Conal says. It was after midnight and raining when he and friends put the first Gates posters up near City Hall, only to find that the police were right behind them, methodically removing each one before their boss came to work.

"That whole action was in homage to John Heartfield," he says. "All over Berlin, in 1932, he put up posters of Hitler with the words 'Adolf the Superman swallows gold and spouts junk.' In 1933, he jumped out of his bedroom window as the SS were coming in the front door, and he escaped to Prague. I admire his action."

An excited band of assistants lug the finished photomural of "Dis-Arm" into the gallery. As the image is unpacked, Conal gasps, "Oh man! Yes!" A cameraman from "Good Morning America" trails after Conal documenting this enthusiasm as he slaps five with Al Shaffer, the assistant who staged and took the photograph.

The rest of Conal's exhibition is already on display. There are six other images of a disembodied nightstick beating the cowering figures of human skeletons and captioned with texts that read: "Dis-Continue," "Dis-Obey," "Dis-This," "Dis-Integration," "Dis-Location," "Dis-Illusion."

On another wall is a series called "Gag Me With the Supreme Court" featuring the five justices who upheld the "gag rule" (Rust vs. Sullivan, 1991) prohibiting doctors in federally funded family planning clinics from mentioning the word *abortion* to their patients, and Clarence Thomas "who would have, if he could have," according to Conal.

Each portrait states "Gag Me with a . . .," then finishes the sentence with a biting reference to

the options that might be left to women if abortion becomes illegal: *prayer, rhythm, speculum, forceps, coat hanger*. A special punch line is attached to the portrait of Thomas, recalling his nomination hearings: "Gag me with a Long Dong condom." This canvas is a gag of its own, a poster plastered near every polling station.

"My art functions best on the street as a low-level irritant," Conal says.

The humor and expressive style of the "Gag Me" series is that for which Conal has become infamous. His posters have been found decorating cities around the nation since 1986, when he launched the first of his mordant series on the Reagan Administration, "Men With No Lips."

But these days, his work is ubiquitous. His Planned Parenthood-sponsored billboard of Supreme Court justices smashing the phrase "Freedom of Choice" is prominent at the Westside intersection of Pico Boulevard and Robertson Avenue.

"Pigeons sit on their heads, making their own, uh, comments," Conal jokes. "I feel the same way about those guys. I guess it's become participatory art."

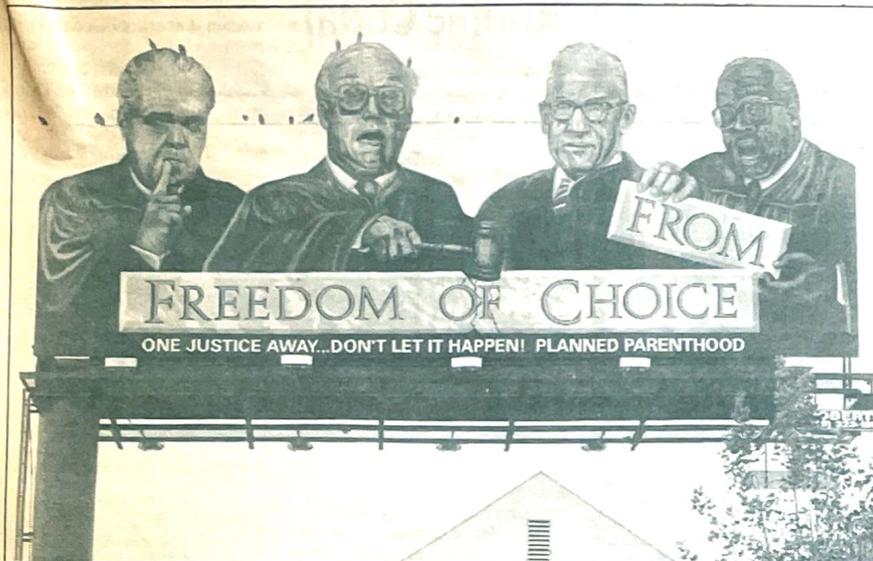
Also, Conal's posters can be seen this month in three major motion pictures: "Bob Roberts," "Sneakers" and "The Mighty Ducks." ("My proudest moment," he says, chuckling over the last.) They are prominent in the latest Sonic Youth video, for the single significantly titled "Youth Against Fascism."

After finishing his gallery installation, Conal must race home to ready himself for another evening of slathering the city with the latest missive, a color cartoon of Dan Quayle with the words *Damage* over his forehead and *Control* over his mouth. Conal's all-night postering expeditions have become media events in their own right, becoming fodder for MTV and "Good Morning America."

Usually 20 to 60 followers—from rock musicians to college professors—meet behind Zucky's delicatessen in Santa Monica. "We used to meet at Canter's, but they're on strike," Conal says.

Armed with a bucket of glue, brushes and 40 posters, the followers are sent into the night. But first, Conal hands out copies of assorted tips for avoiding arrest called "Guerrilla Etiquette" and the telephone number of a sympathetic bail bondsman.

These guerrilla artists are among the folks who attended Conal's opening last month. There are very few of the artists, critics or collectors one sees at the other gallery openings around town but abundant personalities from the ACLU and Planned Parenthood, Topanga Canyon and talent agencies. There's a Harley-riding artist in a black leather jacket waiting for his Harley-riding pal, an apparently liberal member of the Los Angeles Police Department in full uniform. Actors Richard Mazur and Susan



ALAN SHAFFER

Conal's Westside billboard of Supreme Court Justices Scalia, Rehnquist, White and Thomas smashing the phrase "Freedom of Choice" allows pigeons, as the artist jokes, to make "their own, uh, comments."

Anspach, Hollywood agent Paul Haas, Atlantic Records Vice President and ACLU executive Danny Goldberg, TV producer Stephen Nathan ("Love & War") and HBO Vice President Richard Waltzer are on hand.

"They are my fans," Conal says matter-of-factly.

He spends much of the night working the crowd with handshakes and hugs, then takes his place behind a table to autograph copies of his book. But not everyone is a fan. Marty Koplin received an anonymous message on the answering machine: "How dare you show this liberal scum?"

"I used to get phone calls like that all the time," Conal says, "until Debbie made me get an unlisted number."

A self-described media junkie, Conal is ready for prime time. He and Ross recently bought a Gregory Ain house on the Westside. "Ain was the socialist architect," Conal says with pride.

Relentless trafficking in the realm of popular culture has its drawbacks for someone aspiring to retain his identity as an artist. Settling down at the built-in kitchen table, Conal says, "You lose things like inner peace. You lose the pretensions of being the hot line to the sublime." Laughing at himself, he adds, "I have a hard time maintaining cognitive space for just woodshedding, going into my room and playing with my crayons and continuing the relationship between me and my creative process. I'm so busy responding to current events I sometimes feel the loss of my personal expression."

There have been other drawbacks. This is the first solo exhibition of Conal's art at a commercial gallery since 1988. He says he has been paid as much as \$25,000, for his portrait of George Bush with "It Can't Happen" and the conclusion "Here" stenciled over the Presi-

dent's forehead. But he has been without regular gallery representation for nearly a decade.

He seems resigned: "I've always enjoyed a certain relationship with the art world and municipalities around the country that goes something like this: People in the art Establishment say, 'It's really good art, great on the streets where it belongs, but don't bring it in here.' And city bureaucracies say, 'It's really great stuff. It should be in the galleries and museums where it belongs and not on the streets.'"

Says Conal: "This is not what you would call a career-planning move. I operate the way I always have, putting one foot in my mouth at a time. I'm kind of making it up as I go along."

That has meant taking advice and feeling his way gingerly through the prickly forests of art, politics and the media.

"I met David Hockney at a party once," Conal says. "He came up to me carrying his little dog and said, 'Oh, you're the nasty boy who makes all those nasty portraits of bad men, aren't you?'"

"I said, 'Yes, I am.'"

"He said, 'I have some advice for you. Make lithos.'"

"And he was right! My lithos sell for between \$500 and \$2,000. I've probably made as much money on them as on my paintings."

Conal likes to say that he got politics with his Cheerios. He grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the child of union organizers. He recalls: "I was never interested in the ivory tower or being part of the academic art world with some kind of educational barbed-wire fence around me. I'm trying to paint a populist art form. There is a tradition of that kind of work."

In his autobiography, he is specific: "As a personal focus, art was second only to baseball. I lived and

died with the Brooklyn Dodgers and was just about weaned on Goya, Daumier, Kathe Kollwitz, George Grosz and, later, John Heartfield, the great Mexican muralists, Siquieros, Rivera and Orozco."

In 1963, Conal found his way to the Haight district of San Francisco. He graduated from San Francisco State University with a bachelor of fine arts degree. After 10 years of driving cabs and honing his artist-survival strategies, Conal decided to get serious about his art.

He had been dedicated to a style of abstraction that art historians call "biomorphic."

"Basically, I was doing protoplasmic creatures whirling around in a creational soup," he recalls. He applied to Stanford University to study with Frank Lobdell, a Bay Area second-generation Abstract painter who specialized in just that sort of style, and with Nathan Oliveira, who is a figurative painter.

Conal received a scholarship to the relatively conservative graduate school.

"I say I got psychedelized at San Francisco State and professionalized at Stanford," Conal says. "I was swept out of a used-TV store where I was living and deposited at a country club. They gave me lots of money and nothing to do but paint, and I'm eternally grateful to them. They may not be so proud of me now but I love them."

His confidence in Abstract painting was undermined by a trip to Rome with his then-girlfriend, a Renaissance art historian. "She stood me in front of Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment' wall at the Sistine Chapel and it was like an epiphany." Abstraction no longer seemed the appropriate vehicle for his increasingly political beliefs.

"I decided that I was going to figure out how to make art about social and political issues and make

pictures of people. It took me five years. The person who helped me the most was Leon Golub."

Golub's monumental stylized canvases documenting brutal police beatings in South Africa and South America were gaining popularity in the '80s and commanding significant six-digit price tags. Nonetheless, in the role of visiting artist, first at the University of Georgia, then at the University of Connecticut, Conal invited Golub to lecture and in the process befriended the older artist.

After each visit, Conal invited Golub to his studio, where Golub would warn: "You want to know what I really think?"

"[Each year] he tore my work to shreds and left me a puddle on the floor," Conal recalls.

By 1986, Golub had persuaded Conal. "He said, 'Get rid of all the naked jumping figures. Anything you really want to say you can get into the portraits of the politicians. This way you won't be beating people over the head with people being beaten over the head.'"

Within the year, Conal had painted horrifying portraits of Ronald and Nancy Reagan and friends—"Men With No Lips" and "Women With Teeth." Rejected by the elitist art galleries, Conal went to the public. He made posters of the paintings and slathered them on telephone poles, the walls of construction sites and abandoned buildings. Ever since, he has led a double life, trying to meld his high-art background with his populist leanings. Mass media seems to be winning.

"I have no illusions about American popular culture being able to support any form of resistance including my own. But on the other hand I think there is only one game in town, and if you want to play ball, you have to decide if you want to play in the sandlots or in the major leagues," Conal explains via one of his frequent baseball metaphors. "If I'm gonna be a part of the cultural dialogue of my lifetime, I might as well play as hard as I can. I'll leave it to my audience to hold me accountable as to whether I sold out."

"This is the world of *Realpolitik*," he adds firmly. "As long as people like Jesse Helms and his confederates have declared cultural civil war on the rest of the United States, I think it's incumbent upon artists in all media to get together and fight back. I'm determined to do that and to have a good time and

provide a little counter-infotainment for people."

But how long can a middle-aged Jewish boy play at midnight guerrilla politics?

"That's a really good question, and every time I stand up in front of a crew, the first thing that comes to my head is 'I can't believe I'm doing this again!' I don't think I have that many posters left in me."

Conal's interest in popular culture is now directing him toward "the most creatively advanced narrative fictional form in America"—the television commercial.

"We would like to try our hand at doing a 30-second video that would be slipped into TV somehow, combining animation, live-action footage, type treatments and audio about issues that we think are important and with a sense of humor," Conal says, brimming with his usual enthusiasm. "That might never have occurred to me when I was in my room playing with my crayons in 1986. But it's another of the advantages of being in L.A. These facilities are around. It's a matter of hooking up with wonderful people to do all the work for you." □

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