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ANNE CUBACK Los Angeles Times

TOOLS OF HIS TRADE: Robbie Conal prepares in his studio for his Track 16 retrospective. The man behind seminal posters of headline-makers also has created a large body of fine art.

Poster boy for mischief

He's known for pointed political images. Yet Robbie Conal is a fine artist — with an edge.

By IRENE LACHER
Special to The Times

THE MAN in the two-tone Ray-Ban glasses looked familiar, but Lawrence Shapiro couldn't place him. He was cheerfully holding out a box of Italian cookies to anyone walking through the door of Bergamot Station's Track 16 Gallery — which was where Shapiro happened to find himself — and his shock of gray hair and youthful bounce twanged something in Shapiro's memory. The cookie bearer introduced himself as Robbie Conal.

"I haven't seen you for a long time," said Shapiro, a photographer and former Santa Monica arts commissioner. "I wasn't used to seeing you out of context. I thought you were just on the side of buildings."

It's the rare artist who's told that he's "out of context" in an art gallery, but then Conal took something of a back road to public prominence. Dismissing art galleries as "fancy stores [that] invest objects with a narcotic effluvia of 'high' culture" 20 years ago, he made his name by making midnight raids on cities from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., plastering walls with his instantly recognizable posters born of political rage — expressionistic, almost violent, portraits of headline-makers coupled with punny epigrams turned on their heads.

But success has been double-edged for Conal. Even now, most sentient beings older than 35 in [See Conal, Page E4]

Chronicling culture

[Conal, from Page E1]

L.A. remember his poster of Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker staring blankly above the words "False Profit." But many don't realize that he's a fine artist, not a graphic designer, with a complex body of work that's more diverse than his signature pieces alone and a lengthy track record teaching painting and drawing at USC, UCLA and Otis Parsons School of Art & Design, now called Otis College of Art and Design. A broad survey of his artwork — about 100 paintings and drawings spanning 30 years — will be gathered in a career retrospective, "Robbie Conal: No Spitting No Kidding," which runs from Saturday to Nov. 22 at Track 16 in Santa Monica.

An ironic venue for setting the record straight? Not really. The truth is that Conal loves art galleries, always has; he haunted them growing up as a kid in New York the way more typical youth do malls. And it doesn't surprise — or even dismay — him that the medium and the message of political posters have overshadowed his identity as a fine artist, despite the images' origins as dense, painterly canvases inspired by German Expressionism.

Turning heads

Conal, still boyish at 63, says he knew it would happen. "The art that I made to be posters was made as paintings and drawings. I went to art school [at Stanford and San Francisco State]. I'm a painter so I paint. Expressionism is distortion for expressive effect, so you distort people's features to communicate something about them, whether it's the kind of pressure they're under, who they are, turning themselves into a pretzel psychologically, whatever it is. I paint because that's the way I get to the essence of my subjects, and so I never expect anybody to look at those posters on the street and say, 'Oh, that's a painting.' I'm happy if they go, 'What the hell is that?' I really am."

Or at least he was. Conal's poster heyday in the late '80s and early '90s, taking on Reagan-era icons such as Oliver North, Jesse Helms and the progenitor of Reaganomics, earned him a place of prominence among political satirists on the left. Howard Zinn, the political scientist and author of the 1980 bestseller "A People's History of the United States," called his work "outrageous, bold, unsparring and . . . a welcome offering to the struggles of Americans against war and injustice." In the preface to "Artburn," a collection of Conal's monthly L.A. Weekly columns from 1997 to 2003, Zinn compared him to Honoré Daumier, and he wasn't alone. The Hammer Museum grouped Conal with the legendary French satirist along with his heroes Klaus Staack and José Guadalupe Posada in its '93 show



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HIS POINT: Robbie Conal says viewers may think, "That's impressive, but I don't really want that in my living room."

"The Art of Attack: Social Comment and Its Effect."

The experience should have thrilled him, validating his life's work to date. It did — and then it didn't. "It was very humbling," says Conal, whose paintings had been the subject of a mid-career retrospective at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts three years earlier. "I had my own room, and they let me sit there for a while before the show opened. I thought, 'These guys are so great, and I'm doing a head and a word, a head and a word.' It was so boring. I'm always doing other stuff but not for public address. And it is true that if you just had 12 heads like this and you saw it, you'd go, 'That's impressive, but I don't really want that in my living room, because these are the guys you want to get rid of.'"

As he speaks, Conal considers a few large paintings perched in a back room at Track 16, waiting for the gallery staff to begin the massive task of sifting through 30 years of work to curate the show. Against a wall stands a towering triptych of black-and-white portraits of Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and Martin Luther King Jr. above the words "waiting," "watching" and "dreaming."

He made the 72-inch-high images of the princes of peace in 2002, in the wake of 9/11, and plastered poster versions around Los Angeles that December. "It was the first time in 20 years that I did a public portrait that was positive," he muses. "I had done 20 years of bad guys, and it's hard, having bad guys in your studio all the time. It gets to you."

Mischief maker

All along, Conal had been painting things he loved, which generally came under the headings of cats and baseball.

A series of etchings depicting gleeful, glittery skeletons playing ball with Day of the Dead-style bravura appeared in a 2006 show at Track 16 called "Apocalypso Facto." The show also included skeletal images that evoked their grim association with death; their heads were modeled on members of the Bush administra-

tion, whose "permanent war on terror" and other controversies reinvigorated Conal's political work. A poster of George W. borrows a phrase made famous by his father and stamps it with his stiletto wit: "Read My Apocalyps."

Indeed, Conal has continued making challenging art even as his style has evolved, and he's just as keen as ever on infusing it with mischief, which he calls the "heh-heh factor — you rub your hands together and imagine that the new piece you're working on will be pithy and funny and somewhat wicked and well received by your peeps, while irritating to the point of gaffly-dom to your perceived perpetrators."

After his epiphany at the Hammer in the mid-'90s, Conal began making what he calls "decade paintings," which fuse photo montages drawn from popular culture with political images, creating a wordless dialogue. A new '80s painting combines Smurfs, the Death Star from "Star Wars" and a scene from the television soap "Dallas" with a portrait of the Reagans, along with such royal symbols as a crown and a corgi.

"The synergy of popular culture and politics is powerful," he says. "They do feed off of each other and exist in the same space." Only one decade painting has been previously exhibited.

Conal's work may not be for the fainthearted — a fact that drove him to the streets in the first place — but it is for the dedicated. Collectors such as Los Angeles architect Tim Campbell say they're loyal precisely because his work is difficult.

"A lot of people wouldn't want to live with an image of Bush and Cheney in their office making gang signs with the words 'blood for oil,' but I want to be reminded of why I'm [ticked] off," he says. "It keeps me from being lulled into complacency."

Robbie Conal Career Survey, Track 16 Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica. Opens Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. (310) 264-4678.