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Bruce Conner: 'Falling Leaves: An Anonymous Memorial'

By HOLLAND COTTER

Paula Cooper Gallery

521 West 21st Street, Chelsea

Through Sept. 24

Just to keep himself and the art world off balance, the artist Bruce Conner twice announced his own demise before he died in 2008 at 74. He also gave notice of official retirement from art in 1999, but he continued to produce work for nearly a decade more under different aliases, the most common being Anonymous. It was under that name that he began a series of ink drawings called "Falling Leaves: An Anonymous Memorial" after hearing radio reports of the World Trade Center's destruction on Sept. 11, 2001. The drawings, mounted with fabric borders to suggest Asian-style scroll paintings, consist of varying numbers of cut-out inkblots, mostly black, in the form of differently sized and shaped leaves. Some are arranged in symmetrical patterns, others scatter across the paper support and out onto the frame.

Mr. Conner's art, which included work in several media, from drawings to films, was always conscientiously eclectic, with two threads running through: political awareness and an impulse toward the visionary. Both strands meet in his plain, quiet, subtle response to an unanswerable event, and do again in a wonderful short 2006 collage film that rounds out the show.

Mr. Conner began the film project as a documentary about the gospel group called the Soul Stirrers, which started in Texas in 1926 and later included the singers Lou Rawls and Sam Cooke. The piece he finished, however, is only about five minutes long. It consists of bits of archival, staged Depression-era film of African-American workers and churchgoers set to a soundtrack of the Soul Stirrers, with R. H. Harris the high tenor lead, singing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." When it comes to meditating on unthinkable tragedy, no art can ever say it all, but this little film, so sweet with hope, says a lot.