

Tom Fairs

KERRY SCHUSS

If you're looking for someone who maintained the supposedly old-fashioned ideal—a cynic would call it the myth—of the pure artist who is focused solely on the work itself, without a thought of fame, fashion, or money, you could do worse than to check out Tom Fairs. When Fairs died in 2007, he was essentially unknown. A lifelong Londoner born in 1925, he studied stained-glass design and then became a teacher of drawing and theater design. Only after his retirement in 1987, apparently, did he begin to focus on painting. His ideal was Pierre Bonnard. He never had a one-person show, exhibiting his work primarily in the Royal Academy of Art's annual summer exhibitions—as good a way to hide in plain sight as any, I'd say.

Unfortunately, New Yorkers have yet to get a firsthand look at Fairs's paintings, but this second posthumous exhibition of his works on paper is enough to demonstrate that he was an artist of real substance and ambition. "Drawings June–July 2004" consists of twelve of the twenty-four sheets in one of Fairs's notebooks. It makes clear that the art to which Fairs had dedicated himself was based on his direct observation of the phenomenal world, mainly as he experienced it in the ever-changing

microcosm that is London's Hampstead Heath, and on his finding a sort of hidden order in it. But however based in perception, Fairs's aesthetic can't exactly be described as one of realism. The first thing that strikes one about his drawings is the enormous variety and vivacity of the pencil marks, an enormously and counterintuitively wide-ranging shorthand. From these myriad jots and scribbles, Fairs would, with enormous resolve and concentration, build up a landscape that, despite the small space he allowed himself (roughly four by five-and-a-half inches), can seemingly be as deep and vast, as unkempt and unpredictable, as the reality that inspired it. In each drawing, a crazy profusion of details—not one of which has anything to do with what would ordinarily be called naturalistic rendering, and each of which appears to have been notated without overt reference to the others—nonetheless conspires to construct a picture as firm and clear as anything to which Cézanne would have aspired. The drawings at once exude contemplative patience and seat-of-the-pants rapidity.

"The ever-present transforming principle moves me," Fairs wrote. He perceived an everlasting mutability beneath the seeming stability of phenomena, and his drawings prove it with their astonishing diversity despite the most limited of means. Although he claimed to "have no theories, no special techniques and no information to communicate," he was no more a simple empiricist or blinkered anti-intellectual than was Samuel Beckett, whose aspiration was similarly "not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying." That might be a kind of nihilism, but it's the kind that could cure you of cynicism.

—Barry Schwabsky



Tom Fairs, untitled, 2004, pencil on paper, 5½ x 4½".