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, appar-
etly, did he begin to focus on pain-
ting. His idol was Pierre Bonnard. He
never had a one-person show, exhib-
ting 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 posthu-
mous 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 note-
books. 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 vivaci-
y of the pencil marks, an enormously and counterintuitively wide-
ranging shorthand. From these myriad jotts and scribbles, Fairs
would, with enormous resolve and concentration, build up a land-
scape 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 refer-
ce 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