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Tom Fairs: 'Drawings June-July 2004'

By ROBERTA SMITH NOV. 29, 2012

*Kerry Schuss
34 Orchard Street,
near Hester Street
Lower East Side
Through Dec. 23*

There's an almost demonic energy to the small, concentrated drawings of Tom Fairs (1925-2007), a British painter and stained-glass artist who did not devote himself full time to his art until he retired from teaching in 1987. Something of a recluse, Mr. Fairs never had a solo show during his lifetime. His primary means of public exposure seems to have been the annual Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy, to which he regularly submitted paintings.

The first show of Fairs's work in this country, held in the summer of 2011 at this gallery (then called KS Art in TriBeCa), focused exclusively on his drawings and was a minor art-world sensation. This second contains only 12 drawings made from late June to late July 2004, but is nonetheless a gift, especially if you missed the first.

Equipped with graphite and index cards (mostly), Fairs recorded the world around him: the streets and houses near his north London home and the woods, fields and pathways of Hampstead Heath. Moved by what he called "the ever-present transforming principle" of rendering "things seen," he was aided by a nearly photographic eye and an amazing vocabulary of jabs, slashes, scribbles, tiny circles; a tonal spectrum ranging from pale grainy gray to solid silver-black, and an unerring sensitivity to the lighting effects of even the tiniest patch of blank paper. With this remarkable skill set, he described trees, brick walls, bushes, grasses, light and space, orchestrating uncanny coalescences of surface texture and observed life. Fairs's efforts on paper have justifiably been compared with Bonnard and van Gogh; he was clearly one of the era's greatest draftsmen. An exhibition of his paintings should come next.