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TOM FAIRS: 'Drawings'

By **KEN JOHNSON** JUNE 2, 2011

KS Art

73 Leonard Street, TriBeCa

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You might mistake the small town-and-country drawings in this lovely show for the works of an early-20th-century follower of Pierre Bonnard or Édouard Vuillard. The truth is that the British painter Tom Fairs (1925-2007) did not begin producing art full time until after he retired from teaching at London's Central School of Art and Design (now Central Saint Martins) when he was 60.

Working with soft pencils in sketchbooks ranging from postcard- to laptop-size, Fairs drew the Victorian buildings, cobbled allies and backyard gardens around his North London home and the woods and fields of nearby Hampstead Heath with an almost shocking avidity. Selected from hundreds that he made during his last two decades, the drawings here show him to have been as alive to the action of applying graphite to paper as he was to what he was looking at in the world. With each piece, it seems as if he were discovering drawing for the first time and, wonderstruck, teaching himself from scratch how to represent leafy trees, snowy fields, crowded rooftops and whatever else came into view.

There is an outsiderlike intensity to Fairs's work. Different pieces call to mind Van Gogh, Charles Burchfield and some forgotten illustrator under the spell of Gothic Romance, but Fairs was never not himself.

Evidently lacking either the confidence or the ambition for worldly success, however, Fairs never had a solo exhibition during his lifetime. This is the first show devoted exclusively to his work. It is inspiring.