

VAN DOREN  
WAXTER

## **HYPERALLERGIC**

### **It's Hard to Lie in a Drawing**

by John Yau, November 25, 2012



All drawings by Tom Fairs (all images courtesy Kerry Schuss, aka KS Art)

For the last twenty years of his life, Tom Fairs (1925–2007) daily drew in small notebooks what he saw. One of these notebooks is the basis of this exhibition. The notebook was done in June and July of 2004. Of the twenty-four drawings that Fairs made in this notebook, only twelve passed muster. These he framed with a pencil line border. The rest he may have thought needed more attention or weren't good enough — no one knows for sure. Done entirely in pencil, the twelve drawings measure a little more than 4 x 5 ½ inches, with some vertical and others horizontal in orientation. The subjects are things and places he found in London's Hampstead Heath and the Georgian buildings, streets and gardens of the surrounding area. Nearly eight hundred acres, Hampstead Heath is a public park dating to the middle ages.



Done quickly and on site, most likely while Fairs was standing or sitting before his subject, holding the notebook in one hand and drawing with the other, the artist developed a lexicon of marks inspired by Asian calligraphy, Seurat's pressure-sensitive evocations of light and dark arrived at through how much pressure he applied to the graphite, Van Gogh's abstract notations, and the all-over patterning of Edouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard. He was an Englishman thoroughly familiar with the breakthroughs in drawing that took place in France beginning with the Post-Impressionists.

While it is clear who and what Fairs learned from, it is equally apparent that his drawings constitute a remarkable body of work that stands fully on its own. We don't need to know anything about the artist to sense the decisiveness and clarity that went into each rapidly made mark; eye and hand worked in tandem in a way that few artists achieve.

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One of the great things about artists — and this is certainly true of the best — is that they don't listen to those who are given to making sweeping pronouncements. Thankfully, not everyone hooked his or her wagon to Clement Greenberg when he declared that drawing was superfluous to painting and, by implication, an obsolete activity. Even in age where the author is dead, it is still true that no two signatures are alike. And yet, we seem to think so little of drawing that I wonder if it's because of the challenge to orthodoxy that the very act of it embodies. You don't have to be skilled or de-skilled to make a drawing. It strikes me as rather parsimonious to consider such a humble activity to be an obsolete bourgeois pastime or a waste of creative energy, though I suspect there are people who think exactly that.

It was Paul Cummings (1933–1997), a curator of drawings at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the director of the oral history project of the Archives of American Art, who said to me on more than one occasion: “You can’t lie in a drawing.” Perhaps that is the real reason why drawing gets so little attention. We prefer the company of liars, the bigger the better.

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This is something Fairs wrote:

My interest is primarily in things seen: landscape, interiors, still life where, in the light of the imagination, the commonplace may be transformed into the extraordinary. The ever-present transforming principle moves me. I have no theories, no special techniques and no information. I try to achieve a brief glimpse of the implicit order that lies beneath what we perceive as reality.

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There is a remarkable interplay between what Fairs was looking at and what he was drawing. This is what lifts the drawings up from the pedestrian. With soft pencils Fairs got both the light and variety of forms he saw in the park — the different kinds of leaves and shadows, a patch of spiky cattails, the irregular repetition of a fence along a pathway, the angles of the branches, and the texture of the bark. In all the drawings we feel as if we are in a specific location, a physical space. He seems never to have returned to exactly the same spot. Despite their modest size — about the size of a note card — the drawings invite you to scrutinize deep and tangible spaces. They are the kinds ordinary spaces one walks past in a park without feeling the need to linger.

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Tom Fairs taught set design for many years at London's Central School of Arts and Design. The notebook drawings were often meant as studies for paintings; he never showed any of them in his lifetime. This is the

second show of Fairs' work at Kerry Schuss (KS Art). In these ideologically riddled times, it is — to cite a line from a poem by Cathy Park Hong — an island without a flag.

Tom Fairs *continues at Kerry Schuss (KS Art) (34 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) until December 23.*