

VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

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David Byrd by Jody Zellen
Matthew Brown, Los Angeles, California
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David Byrd, "Patient Pondering," 1995 oil on canvas 24 x 31".

David Byrd (1926-2013) worked as an orderly in the psychiatric ward of the Montrose, New York Veterans' Affairs hospital from 1958 to 1988. Before that, he studied at the Ozenfant School of Art in New York, but did not pursue a career in the arts. Rather, he worked odd jobs before relocating upstate to work at the VA Medical Center. At work, Byrd began to observe the patients' daily rituals and routines, often making sketches during work hours. In essence, the patients became his muses.

During his retirement years, Byrd focused solely on drawings and paintings documenting his environs, both people and the landscape, and from his memories of working at the mental hospital's psychiatric ward. In the final decade of his life, Byrd began to chronicle his time at the Veterans Center, gathering drawings and textual fragments that described his experiences there and compiling them into a book. Many of these pages are on view in the exhibition.

Byrd gained little recognition for his artworks during his lifetime, though he did have one solo exhibition in 2013 just before his death. In recent years, his work has found an audience and has been more widely exhibited and collected. Byrd painted because he wanted and needed to. He regarded it as a meditative process and as a means of self-improvement. He said, "I tried to paint because I had the remote idea that it might serve me in my behavior to others." Looking at the works through that lens, together with his direct observations of the sufferings of others, the images document not only a specific era and place, but also the effect the job had on Byrd's own psyche. His realistic scenarios were created with sketchy outlines and a soft palette consisting mostly of earth tones. The images are compassionate and thoughtful, while also conveying the suffering he witnessed.



David Byrd, "Hell of an Evening," 1992, oil on canvas 19 x 24"

This exhibition is the first of Byrd's work in Los Angeles. It includes twenty-one paintings, eleven framed drawings from his sketchbook, and thirty pages from a handmade manuscript documenting his time at Montrose. The paintings are culled from different series and feature quirky landscapes, images of Byrd's family, and patients at the hospital. In each, he articulates a range of emotions, be they pain or pleasure. For example, in "Hell of an Evening" (1992), three people are seated at a table in the center of a brown hued room that is otherwise mostly empty. A large woman has her back to us, another raises her fist in a fit of anger. On the left, a half-naked man sleeps on a small bench. Two other male figures wash dishes at a sink located at the back of the room. An elongated figure in a blue coat or robe approaches a doorway on the right.

Feelings of distress and isolation are also captured in "Patient Pondering" (1995). Byrd depicts a receding interior space, a hallway or cell with a single light source. Five men are illuminated by this window. Closest to it, a man in brown pants and shirt with a green hat gazes into the distance, a patch of sun filling his chest. Behind him and farther back in the room are the other men — two on the floor, one creeping against a wall and the last in blue silhouette toward the back. Each figure appears lost in their own thoughts, neither aware of nor engaged with one another. Other hospital paintings include "Alcove" (n.d.), "Man With Mirror" (1999) and "Agonized" (1970), in which a man lies splayed across a wooden chair, filling the composition like a hovering ghost with a clown-like expression of agony emblazoned on his face.

Paintings such as "People at the Bar (P53)," (1960), "Pool Players" (n.d.) and "Sparring Partners" (1954) fall more into the Social Realist tradition. Here, Byrd depicts the world beyond the walls of the ward, be it people playing pool, enjoying drinks at a fancy bar, or gathering at a boxing match, capturing the everyday in a way reminiscent of Edward Hopper, Ben Shahn, or Jacob Lawrence, stylized and illustrative simultaneously. As a painter, Byrd had a light touch and a sketchy quality. His palette is somber and his application of paint is subtle and washy, eschewing impasto.

In addition to these tender paintings, there are eleven framed, untitled pencil on paper drawings from Byrd's sketchbooks. Images depict interior and exterior scenes, as well as studies that juxtapose random fragments, as in "Sketchbook 5, p. 13," (n.d.), where he brings together a woman in a swimsuit carrying an umbrella, a woman brushing her teeth, work boots and a man dressed in winter garb. His drawing style is at once descriptive and expressive.



David Byrd, "Agonized," 1970, oil on canvas, 33 x 42".

One of the highlights is the display of pages, spread out in vitrines, from "Montrose VA 1958-1988," a hand-made book that Byrd worked on from 1999-2013. Here, he recorded his impressions and memories of working at the Veterans' Center, taping his small sketches to pieces of construction paper and compiling them into a 218-page book/diary. In pencil and all caps, the text is of Byrd's observations in the hospital. He recorded in depth the interactions between patients and staff, as well as the ways he saw the patients relating to the physical space. Many of the drawings in the book were later recreated as paintings.

Byrd had a facile hand and was able to invest intense and often outrageous incidents with compassion. One page from the book depicts and describes showering. It is a colored pencil sketch of two naked men against the wall in a shower room, joined by a third who is more monster than man. The text reads: "Asked what does the picture represent, I can't say for sure. An old man with water feeling good on old bones, a middle person I thought would make the picture better, and a soaped up third character that is momentarily unrecognizable."

Byrd's images of the Veterans' Center invite comparison to the works of Henry Darger and Martin Ramirez, both prolific "outsider" artists, though neither was concerned with their immediate surroundings. While Byrd had artistic training, his works may be fairly regarded as the product of an outsider. But it was his grasp of the goings on in the minds of those experiencing psychotic episodes and the places designed to keep them safe that distinguishes Byrd. The witty, psychological, compassionate body of work Byrd left for us to ponder resonates long after viewing.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com.