

MARTIN-MULLEN ART GALLERY

SUNY ONEONTA FINE ARTS BUILDING

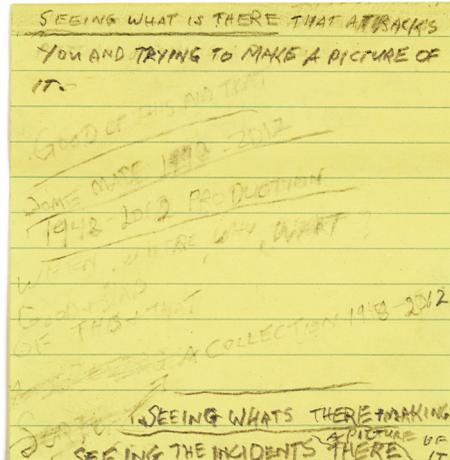


David Byrd: Seeing What is There Sketches, Paintings, Sculpture

November 11–December 20, 2013

SUNY ONEONTA

Martin-Mullen Art Gallery
SUNY Oneonta Fine Arts Building
Oneonta, New York 13820
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Byrd's ideas for the exhibition title



David Byrd in front of *Priest Dog*, Found objects, 85" x 66" x 35"



Catching Up
2003, Oil on canvas, 14" × 18"

Introduction & Acknowledgments

David Byrd met Tim Sheesley, director of the SUNY Oneonta Martin-Mullen Art Gallery, during a visit to the gallery a few months ago with his friend Jessica Farrell. David wanted to exhibit his work in the area where he lived and thought the Martin-Mullen Gallery was a lovely and appropriate space.

While David was in the hospital undergoing radiation treatments, Tim called to schedule an exhibition of David's work in November. David was so pleased to hear this. It gave him an additional feeling of pride at the end of his life.

I honor David with this selection from his life's work. Generally, these various works reveal the way that sketches or drawings led the artist to paintings. Sometimes, though, David would reiterate a painting as a finished drawing. There are several sketches that illustrate the give and take of this practice.

That reflexive effort on his part, to work backward and forward across media, is one of the most curious methods of this artist. I hope that my selection is as inspiring to students and admirers as David and his work have been to me.

I wish to thank and acknowledge David Byrd for these painting, drawings and sculptures. Works in the exhibition are courtesy of the Estate of David Byrd. Photography of the artwork is by

Tom Gorman, gormanstudio.com. I thank Andrea Hull for her video, currently a work in progress, about the life, work and career of David Byrd. I am grateful to Zoë Samels for her thoughtful reflections on and insights into David's work. I also thank Colleen McKinney and Naomi Fisch, who provided editorial guidance.

Tim Sheesley and his staff at the Martin-Mullen Gallery were indispensable for their foresight and assistance in creating the timely opportunity. Greg Kucera's generosity, availability, trust and advice were essential. I am grateful for his insights and his contribution concerning his friendship with David.

Lastly, I would like to thank Steve Hay and my mother, Carol Turner Isaacson, for their guidance, patience and encouragement while gathering the components necessary for this exhibition.

—Jody Isaacson, curator



Man in Doorway
1989, Oil on canvas, 18" × 14"

Seeing What is There: David Byrd at Martin-Mullen Art Gallery

by Zoë Samels

David Byrd's show *Seeing What is There* at SUNY Oneonta's Martin-Mullen Art Gallery presents the evidence of a life spent looking: dozens of pencil sketches, oil paintings and even a few mixed-media sculptures that all take their subjects from an archive of lived experiences. Moving through the gallery, we join Byrd in his watching. His close-cropped compositions bring us right to the edge of the action and, undetected, we observe grooming rituals in *Lavatory at Nighttime* and peer at the open book on the woman's lap in *Porch*. Addressing the idea of an 'honest look' at the world around him through a variety of mediums, Byrd reveals to us a belief that observation and experience are interchangeable modes of artistic production.



Making Bed in Coal Country
2002, Oil on canvas, 20" × 24"



Making Bed
Pencil on paper, 12" × 9"



Agway
1996, Oil on canvas, 20" × 24"



Agway
Pencil on paper, 12" × 9"

Like the antiques auctioneers he often painted, Byrd mined the past—in this case his own—for objects worthy of the present. His paintings and drawings jump back and forth across time, from his unhappy childhood to his thirty-year career as an orderly on a V.A. psychiatric ward. The power of these unsettling, sometimes bizarre scenes is palpable, and we are all guilty of artistic rubbernecking in front of a work like *Making Bed in Coal Country*. The gun, the bed, the blue car—what have we stumbled upon?

Even Byrd's take on the landscape genre feels like a peek behind the curtain. *Agway*, which appears in the show in both drawing and painting form, is a nighttime view of a deserted highway gas station. Vague architectural forms dominate the background, and the pumps stand at attention as we survey the scene. The lights are on, but who is there? Rather than leave us a contextual trail of breadcrumbs to make sense of the scene, he concedes the limitations of his own viewpoint and the uncertainty of bearing witness.

Byrd's most ambitious work draws on his years as an orderly, where confronting the psychological toll of modern warfare was just another day on the job. Both *Man with Mirror* and *Alcove* feature patients in distress, their pain evident but generating from an unknown source. His skill for drawing universal emotions out of specific happenings is most striking here. For while these hospital scenes are among his most alien in subject, they succeed in eliciting a purely human response, and Byrd's empathy towards his complicated subjects is obvious.

Where do we go from here? At times these works threaten to remain a kaleidoscope of shock-value snapshots, too anchored in autobiography to be relatable. Like a recollection recounted or a dream described, something has been lost in the retelling and now we are on the outside, too, left watching Byrd looking at the world. Perhaps, then, it is more productive to turn the tables on Byrd. What can we observe about this artist through his work? After all, the room is filled with the people, places and events that filled his life, and the architecture of his memory is there to be examined. What emerges from such a reading is an artist with a Faulknerian reverence for the import of the past on the present. Byrd was determined to dig up every moment of meaning he had experienced in his long life and set it to canvas or paper, thus equating recollection with re-creation. His endgame was to share with the world what he had seen, proving that a solipsistic existence can be inherently generous. The past wasn't past for David Byrd, and he wanted to show it to you.

Zoë Samels is the Curatorial Assistant in the Department of American & British Paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. She received her MA in Art History from Williams College and her BA from the University of Chicago.



Woman Reading
2008, Oil on canvas, 20" × 24"



Woman Reading, Self Portrait, Landscape
Pencil on paper, 11" × 14"



Byrd's home

David Byrd

by Jody Isaacson

I met David Byrd on September 10th, 2012, and my relationship with him has been one of the most gratifying experiences in my life. He immediately reminded me of my grandfather, whom I loved. Whenever I had passed David's house, the oddly arranged objects in the field in front of it intrigued me: a rusted steel cube, concrete debris, auto parts, wood scraps. Each time I passed I looked for signs of life, but never saw anyone. On this particular day, as I drove by, I saw a slight, stooped man walking toward the house. I circled back and asked him if an artist lived here. He replied, "Well, I'm not sure about that but you're welcome to come in and tell me."

David had arranged his living space not as a home but as a studio and gallery in which every object was carefully placed. A dark stained pitcher sat on a high blue stool, in back of which stood an old paint-peeled door; a variety of glass and ceramic bottles were positioned thoughtfully on shelves, in window ledges, on tables, as if in a display; large, gesturing, crudely carved wooden figures contrasted with the sticks purposely placed in paper bags outside the front door. And the paintings! Everywhere. On every wall, stacked against every wall were the paintings.

In 26 years of living alone, he had had little to do with people. He built his house by himself. He had never exhibited or sold any paintings. Every work of art he had ever made was inside the house.

Before I left, he insisted I see his book. The book is David's magnum opus. Handmade, it is 180 pages,

done in graphite and colored pencil, illustrating many of the major themes of his paintings. The drawings were not studies for his oil paintings; they were sketched *from* the paintings. The book is also filled with an amazing amount of text describing the challenges and rewards of dealing with the patients at the Montrose, New York, V.A. hospital, where he worked for many years as an orderly. More than anything, David wanted this book published.

I wanted to help. My colleague Jessica Farrell and I were curating a small exhibition at a local community center. David allowed us to include 43 of his paintings and three large sculptures. The show was a success and David was ecstatic from the experience.

So happy, in fact, he wanted something more, something that had eluded him his entire life. David was seeking the validation that he was an artist, that he had a voice, and that the pictures he had made contributed to the American art canon of the 20th century.

I brought David's work to the attention of Greg Kucera, a gallery dealer in Seattle who, recognizing the quality of David's work, immediately arranged for an April exhibition. Five days before David and I were to leave New York for the show, he was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Miraculously we made it to the opening. Every detail, from getting David to Seattle, through the show, and back to the V.A. hospital in Albany, was a monumental challenge. Even so, David thought—and surely the people who met him thought—it was worth every effort.

Suddenly I found myself not only advocating for David's work but also managing his care and dying. His illness progressed rapidly. He underwent radiation treatment at the V.A. hospital in Albany. Ten days later, I moved David to an assisted living facility in Oneonta. He wanted to finish a few paintings, so I moved his painting materials to his apartment. He was unable to take care of himself, though, and, within days, unable to walk. I moved him to the V.A. hospital in Oxford. I hung his paintings in his room. The staff loved his work, and many had taken the time to go to Greg Kucera's website and look at more paintings. It was the man himself who made them so curious about the work:

his tone of voice, the soft graciousness of his cadence and his gratitude for everything they were doing to make him comfortable.

I brought David home on two occasions in the spring, his favorite time of year. He wanted to finish signing paintings and say goodbye to his house. During the last three weeks of his life, close, albeit recently found, friends surrounded him. On May 30th, 2013, David died peacefully in his sleep at age 87.

My time with David, however brief, changed my life. He reaffirmed for me that art is my life. My most

meaningful memories of our time together are of reading his book out loud, with him sitting next to me; looking over his ten sketchbooks; and listening to him talk about his paintings and the act of painting. He also talked about opera, movies, his family, his career as a bottle collector, his experience building his house, frugality, how to build a good fire, cooking and eating. My grandfather Gib Turner and David were both very much alive during their lives, alive in their art and in their capacity to feel and share their thoughts. Their lives were works of art.

For me painting is a matter of religion; to keep on painting is the main thing. —David Byrd



Bridge Workers
1989, Oil on canvas, 34" × 42"



Suicide
1998, Oil on canvas, 30" × 40"

The Fastest Friendship I Ever Had

by Greg Kucera

It would have been easy to underestimate David Byrd upon meeting him for the first time. He was an unremarkable looking man with a short, wiry build, thinning white hair and thick glasses. He wore cheap jeans, a blue chambray shirt and an ever-present denim jacket, as if he didn't have enough imagination to do otherwise. His kind, ready smile, but slightly reserved nature, seemed typical for a small-town man in his mid-eighties. But his plain appearance belied a complex and deeply sympathetic personality. His childhood was a heartbreaking litany of paternal rejection, maternal abandonment and a disrupted, dysfunctional family. Time spent in foster homes as a child, and growing up in deprivation during the Great Depression gave way to a poverty of love later in his life. At the age of 32, David went to work as

an orderly in the psychiatric ward at a Veteran's Administration hospital in Montrose, New York. He held the worst job in the hospital, yet stayed there for thirty years, retiring on a modest pension. His early life led him to be an empathetic adult who cared deeply about the patients under his watch, and that concern showed up in his representation of these men in his paintings.

Jody Isaacson showed me his images in November 2012 and I immediately agreed to come out to view the work the following January. In particular, one painting, depicting a graceful, dramatic suicide fall had caught my attention. I wanted this painting and I wanted to show this artist.

Jody and I arrived at his home in the rural Catskills to find David shoveling snow from his steps with all the vigor of a much younger man. With jovial

hospitality, he invited us into his modest and neatly kept home, revealing the obvious care he had invested in building it himself.

Drawing my attention immediately were the multitudes of paintings. They were stacked on the floor and against bookshelves three feet deep. His other, more ingenious method of storing paintings was to hang them on the walls, one on top of another: Behind a large painting would be a smaller one; nested behind that, an even smaller work, and so on, sometimes four paintings deep. Most were smallish by contemporary art standards, from one by two feet to about four by five feet.

The paintings seemed to divide into two obvious groups: depictions of his normal life, and more harrowing views of the lives of patients in the psychiatric ward.

The first group proved to be wide-ranging, including paintings of his childhood memories, the places he lived and worked, small-town settings and the landscapes surrounding them. Notably, there was a touching image of David as a child standing in front of a movie marquee for *The Amazing Fu Manchu* while his mother sits, hands clasped, behind the glass walls of a ticket booth. It was as touching a painting about the unavailability of maternal love as I have ever seen.

The largest category of work revealed the tragic lives of the mentally ill patients he cared for at the V.A. hospital. Some were straightforward portraits, while others appeared to be case studies in the psychological states of the mentally disturbed.

There were also views of the daily lives of the patients, from pill-taking routines to shower rituals, and from the moments of their waking trances through their disturbed sleep. The images convey the dull repetition and hopelessness of these lives damaged during wartime, notably the Vietnam War.

In curating the show, I chose ninety paintings, twenty drawings and three sculptures. As I chose work I wanted, I attempted to sort it into categories

of hospital, landscape, and his life. While each category had a huge range of work within it, what seemed to be most consistent among all the paintings was the color palette of grayed pastel. Almost regardless of when they were painted, most of these were memory paintings, often rendered years after the depicted event had happened. They were finely painted in the style of the Social Realists of the 1940s, with great attention paid to emotional states, as well as composition and the interaction of positive and negative shapes.

David explained that his two-year training at the Ozenfant School of Art in New York City had been fairly academic and old-fashioned. Although he was not a disciple of Amédée Ozenfant, Ozenfant was his most important teacher. Aside from David's painting techniques, it showed in his canvas stretching. He was taught to pull the canvas only to the back edge of the stretcher bars, make very tidy "hospital corners" and then neatly secure the edges every few inches with small black tacks. He did not fold the canvas over the back edge or use a staple gun.

If I asked him about a painting, he would generally say, "Well, that could have been done better," or "That one needs a little work" in some specific area. He was eager to tell us details about making the work; slower to share the deeply personal.

After making my selections, we sat down to discuss the logistics and strategies for our exhibition. While David believed greatly in his own work, he had little faith that any good would come from our show. Nothing in his life so far had left him confident that anyone would understand his work or be willing to buy it.

When told I wanted him to come to Seattle for the opening, he said he was afraid that if he attended the opening, "people would say mean things" to him about the paintings.

David's constant question was, "Can you guarantee me that they will sell?" When I said I would buy some myself he refused. As eager as he was to show and to sell, he didn't want anyone to offer him charity.

Instead, his method was to strike a very hard bargain, perhaps a skill learned in his years as a bottle collector and trader. In his mind, it was reasonable that I should assume every cost for shipment of work, framing, even his travel. I agreed to all his demands.

As my staff and I installed David's exhibition we were excited to see the range of sizes, formats and thematic content. We began to understand how emotionally moving this whole enterprise with David was in our own reactions to the work and in our clients' enthusiasm. I had never seen anything like it in terms of sales for an unknown artist.

In the week before the opening, David was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer but he still came to Seattle. On Thursday, April 4th, as the opening started, Jody brought in David, aided by a walker. We transferred him to a rolling office chair to show him how we had arranged his work. He was quietly effusive and it was obvious he hadn't yet had a clear idea of how his show was going to look or feel.

By that point, we had sold about twenty paintings. With many of those paid for in full, we presented David with an envelope full of checks. I relished the surprised look on his smiling face as he opened the envelope and saw physical evidence of purchases for the first time.

We introduced David to clients, and he charmed them. Collectors were eager to know stories behind particular paintings. Other artists congratulated him on his work. People of all ages, having read the advance press, were there to wish him well and tell him how inspiring his story was to them. Gradually, it dawned on him that everyone was there for him and not against him.

David did a walk-through of the show that Saturday at noon. He came in using his walker and stayed with it. He told the crowd of about 80 people, "I don't have much to say. The paintings

speaking for themselves." But talk he did, going from room to room, speaking about almost every work in some way or another.

The crowd loved listening to him and stayed with him throughout. The scheduled thirty-minute talk lasted more than an hour, with many direct questions about his life and work. I checked his energy level at several points but it didn't flag until he was done talking, tired but truly thrilled.

After David returned to New York, we spoke a few times as sales progressed in the following weeks. With each call his spirit seemed to calm further as his anxieties and fears dissipated. Within weeks after our show closed, David died in his sleep.

* * *

In the few months since David's death, my staff and I have had several very moving conversations about the gravity of our work for David and what it meant to him to have us supporting him and believing in his art.

I returned to David's home in July to help Jody with his estate. As we were moving things around to look for the remainder of his sketchbooks and legal papers, we discovered a few surprises.

Stored carefully on racks in his upstairs closet, David had a collection of stylish shirts, trousers, jackets and shoes from the 1940s and 1950s with labels reading Brooks Brothers, Alexander's and Harris Tweed—as if he hadn't quite given up on them, and had archived them for his later enjoyment.

There were also a few more recently acquired boxes filled with chambray shirts and denim jeans from an auction of remainders. It was a bit strange to reconcile his two styles, having only known the self-effacing, modest David Byrd in his mid-eighties and not the rake he must have been as a younger man. Such is the mystery of David Byrd.



Man with Mirror, 1999
Oil on canvas, 19" x 24"



Patient Pondering, 1995
Oil on canvas, 24" x 31"



Auctioneer
1997, Oil on canvas, 34" × 28"



Sparring Partners
1954, Oil on canvas, 24" × 34"



West Point
Oil on canvas, 40" × 48"

David Byrd: Biographical Timeline

- 1926 Born on February 25, Springfield, Illinois, to parents Eva Munson Byrd (1901–1989) and Farrister Leonard Byrd (1891?–1933).
- 1932 Father leaves household. Drifts around, eventually is admitted to mental hospital.
- 1938 Mother abandons David and three brothers (William, Weldon and Carlyle) and two sisters (Mary and Sadie). Children are sent by Children’s Service League to a local foster home for care.
- 1939 Second foster home, also in Springfield.
- 1940 Father dies of drowning in Quincy, Mississippi. David and his brother Carlyle attend funeral in Quincy.
- 1941 Third foster home in Springfield.
- 1942 Mother gathers children to her Brooklyn home when David is 15. She supports them by working as a ticket seller in a movie theater.
- 1943–45 David joins the Merchant Marine when he is 17 and is sent to Iran, North Africa, France, around the Mediterranean, Taiwan and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Spends most of his time aboard ship as a steward. Draws portraits of shipmates, officers.
- 1947 David is drafted, and sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for field artillery training. Honorably discharged after one year.
- 1948 Makes drawings of boxers at Stillman’s Gym on Eighth Avenue in New York City.
- 1948–58 Holds odd jobs in a liquor store, as a delivery man, usher in a movie house and janitor. Also works on Coney Island for a few summers, bartending at a resort. Mostly low-status jobs, allowing him time to paint.
- 1949–51 Under GI Bill, studies art for a short time at the Dolphin School of Art, a GI-sponsored program in Philadelphia. Transfers to New York to study at the Ozenfant School of Fine Arts to learn art foundation skills. Studies with Ozenfant for two years. (Amédée Ozenfant was a Parisian painter, influenced by Paul Signac and Le Corbusier, and immigrated to the U.S. in 1938.)
- 1950–58 Moves back to Brooklyn with mother and brother Weldon.
- 1958–69 Lives briefly in Montrose, near Newburg and Washingtonville, NY. While living near Newburg spends time collecting architectural relics from abandoned homes and businesses.
- 1958–88 Works as orderly in psychiatric ward at Veteran’s Administration Medical Hospital, Montrose, NY.
- 1964–69 Lives on grounds of V.A. hospital for a time. Begins to salvage wood from abandoned properties in the area to use for eventual home and studio in Sidney Center, NY.
- 1967–77 Marries Shirley Silverman, a nurse at the V.A., and lives in Washingtonville, NY. She has three grown children from previous marriage. Purchases 1765 stone house with clapboard-sided addition for residence. Works on restoring house in free time. Drives two hours back and forth daily for work at V.A. hospital. Many scenes of mountains, hills, rivers and bridges seen from commute are depicted in later landscape pictures.
- 1977 Divorces Silverman. Moves to a small one-bedroom apartment in New Windsor, NY. Lives, works and paints there for 11 years.
- 1989 Mother dies at age 88 outside Cleveland, Ohio.

- 1988–92 Moves to Sidney Center, NY. Purchases 11 acres, including a small hunting shack on property. Builds stone foundation for his home. Lives in hunting shack during construction. Begins carving wood figures from trees on his land.
- 1992–93 Starts work on framing and building home.
- 1994 With home complete and livable, Byrd begins to paint full time from memories and prior sketches covering various times of his life, notably his time working at the V.A. hospital among mentally ill veterans of WWII, Korean War and Vietnam War. Spends most of this time alone, working and painting.
- 2009–12 Begins occasional day trips via bus lines to New York City and Boston.
- 2012 Meets neighbor and fellow artist Jody Isaacson. Has exhibition with five other local artists organized by Maywood Arts at local Schoolhouse Gallery in Sidney Center.
- 2013 First solo exhibition at Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, April 4–May 18. Diagnosed with lung cancer, has radiation treatment. Dies May 30, from complications related to cancer, at the New York State Veterans Home in Oxford, NY.



Counting Change
2010, Oil on canvas, 30" × 25"