

"It's a matter of religion to paint; to keep on painting is the main thing." –David Byrd, 2012

The Opportunity

How often in any art dealer's career does one get offered the chance to work with a mature artist of significant vision who's had no influence from the market on his work?

In April we will show such an artist, a discovery of a significant and, as yet, unseen talent. David Byrd is an 87 year old painter and sculptor who has been making paintings and sculptures in rural NY for the last 65 years. He has never shown his art in a gallery; he has not had any exposure to the market until now. He is a trained artist, a bit of a loner, but not an outsider. Byrd currently lives and works in upstate NY in a great deal of solitude and devotion to his vision. His contact with the art of our time happens with occasional forays into NY or Boston to see notable exhibitions by artists he admires, through subscription to art magazines, and the purchase of art books.



SHOWER ROOM STUDY, 1994 Oil on canvas 26 x 30 inches

In his modest home, built mostly by the artist's hands, Isaacson was astonished to see an entire history of this artist unfold in the 400 some paintings, drawings, watercolors, and sculptures. I felt the same wonderment walking into his home for the first time myself a few months ago.

Artist's History

Byrd was born in 1926, Springfield, Illinois. His father left the home when he was a child. His mother was forced by economic circumstances to abandon Byrd and his five siblings to foster homes. Over four years the children were in three foster family homes.



SUICIDE, 1996 Oil on canvas 30 x 40 inches

I was introduced to Byrd by his neighbor and fellow artist Jody Isaacson, an artist represented by my gallery. Isaacson sensed by the arrangement of work in his yard that another artist was living on her road. Upon their eventual introduction, she encouraged Byrd to show her his work. She related to me how moving she found the experience of seeing his life's work, complete and untouched.



ENTRANCE TO BRIDGE, 1975
Oil on canvas 40 x 44 inches



FOSTER FAMILY, 1990 Oil on canvas 42 x 51 inches

Several paintings, done from memory, document this period of upheaval in his life. (See image at left.)

In 1942, his mother gathered her children back to her but could barely support them while working as a ticket seller at a movie theater. Byrd's mother encouraged him to find suitable employment, rather than pursue his artistic side. In 1945 Byrd joined the Merchant Marines and traveled through Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia before being drafted in to the US Army, as an artillerist. During wartime, Byrd filled sketchbooks with maritime themes and portraits of his fellow sailors and officers.

After the war ended he studied briefly, through the G. I. Bill, at the Dolphin School of Art in Philadelphia, and then at the Ozenfant School of Fine Arts, on the Lower East Side of New York City, gaining basic painting experience, rendering skills, and live model drawing. (Amédée Ozenfant was a Parisian painter, influenced by Paul Signac and Le Corbusier, and immigrated to US in 1938.)

Through the 1950s, Byrd lived in various places in NY, working at Coney Island, and at various odd jobs. Many of his genre scene paintings are from this period of listlessness. In 1958, he accepted employment as an orderly in the psychiatric ward at the Veteran's Administration Medical Hospital, Montrose, NY.



STAIRWAY, 1993 Oil on canvas 16 x 21 inches



BALCONY WITH SCREEN, 1955 Oil on canvas 16 x 21 inches

For the next 30 years, Byrd worked with doctors and nurses in care of the patients whose damage resulted from WW II, the Korean War, and the entirety of the Viet Nam War. This experience provided him with his defining body of paintings related to the patients and their individual behaviors, general routines, and distinct personalities. His daily commute to work provided him with views of bridges, waterways, mountains, and the regional landmarks of filing stations, cafes, shopping centers, and individual characters he noticed repeatedly along the way.

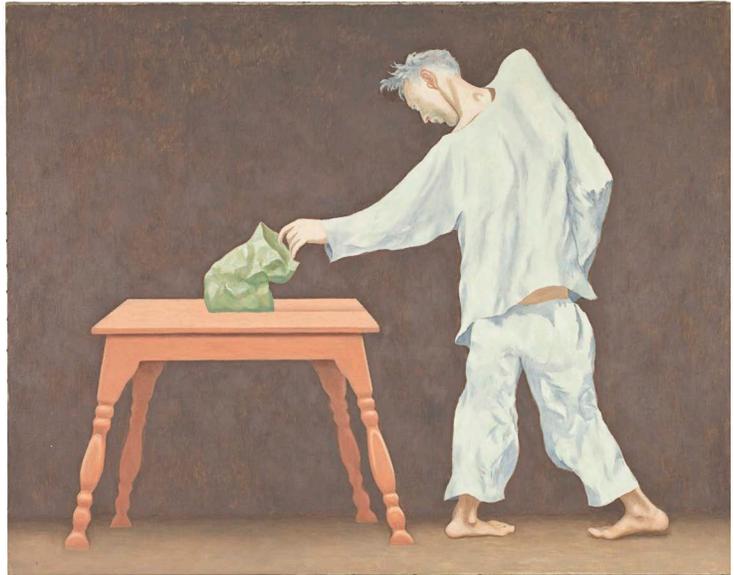
In 1988, Byrd retired from the hospital and moved to Sidney Center, buying a piece of land where he built his

permanent home. For four years, Byrd lived in a small hunter's shack while he built the stone foundation for his home.

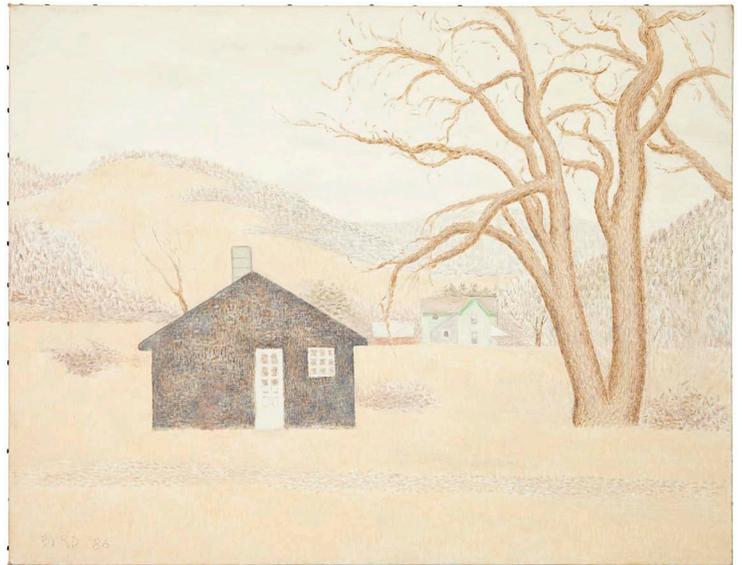
Most of the home and studio he built himself, relying on contractors for some framing and sheetrock work. Some of the architectural details of the home were salvaged from abandoned homes Byrd had scavenged from the previous areas in which he had lived.

Byrd was also an active bottle collector, attending auctions and shows, and trading and dealing his collection for the pleasure of it.

Between 1992 and 2012, Byrd devoted himself to painting, from memory, the places, people and situations he had seen in his previous lives. Sometimes working from small sketches, Byrd captured a great deal of his experience in figural and landscape paintings. Byrd has a subdued palette, a minimal paint surface, and a very striking sense of composition. He pays great attention to the inter-relationship between space and shape, revealing a wondrous push and pull to the negative and positive space in his work.



SACK ON TABLE, 1986 Oil on canvas 33 x 42 inches



CATSKILL SHACK, 1986 Oil on canvas 21 X 27 inches



CENTAUR, 1993
Carved wood and found objects
54 X 16 X 16 inches

According to Byrd, "Painting is all about observation and experience. You have to see the details and have a general idea of the picture from your own experience."

During the last 20 years, Byrd also began a series of wood sculptures, sometimes combining found objects, sometimes carving large blocks of wood into life size figures.

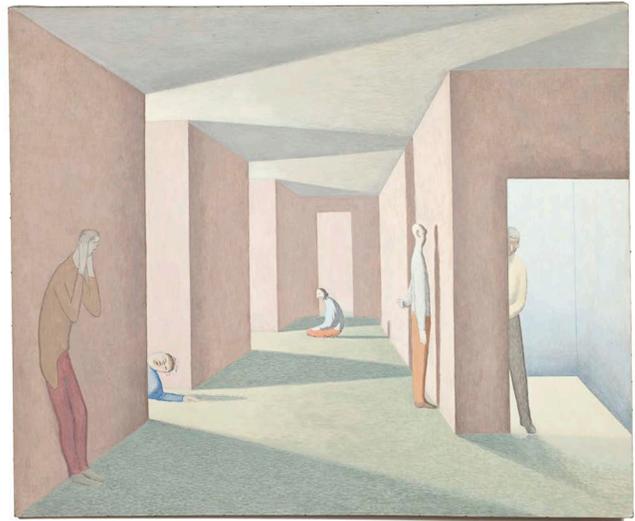
Though Byrd did not become a disciple of Ozenfant, one can sense the formality of Ozenfant in Byrd's love of the arrangement of objects on a plane, and in his sophisticated color relationships in evoking them. Byrd was also aware of other artists such as Giorgio de Chirico, George Tooker, Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper, and the French painters Georges Seurat and Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola).

It is striking to me that, while not ignorant of recent art history, nor of the canon of 20th century artists, Byrd's work is entirely self-possessed and unique in its vision and scope. Byrd's work is anachronistic in that he has remained true to the period of his formation as an artist. One senses the concerns of the artists of the 1930s and 1940s, of social realism, and of genre painting.

Here is that great anomaly in the art world: a fully formed artist, with a tremendous history of painting, but untouched by the commercial world. I feel as if I have been handed a wonderful opportunity and a substantial obligation to place this artist into the history of 20th century art.

The Exhibition

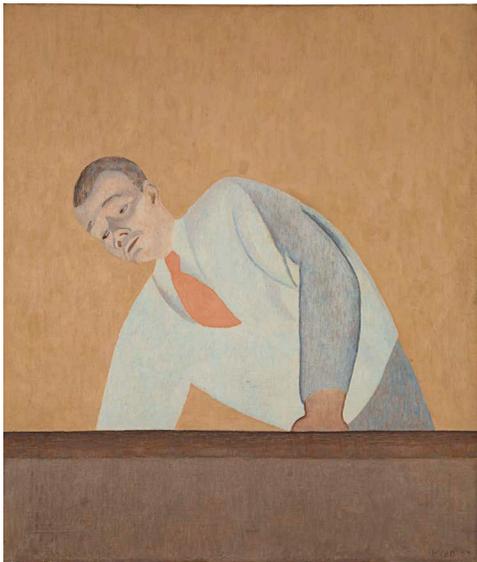
Our exhibition in April will occupy the entire first floor of the gallery and will include nearly 100 of his oil paintings on canvas, works on paper, and found and carved wood sculpture. Our front space will show the largest works of about 3 x 4 feet to 4 x 5 feet. The second and third spaces will reveal his works on paper, including a series of boxing drawings from the late 1940s. The fourth gallery will show the institutional paintings, often drawn as sketches, and then reworked to be complete, and very moving, paintings detailing the lives of the patients under his care.



HOSPITAL HALLWAY, 1992 Oil on canvas 43 x 52 inches

Acknowledgments

We are thankful to Jody Isaacson for sharing with us her discovery of David Byrd's talent. We also thank Tom Gorman, Gorman Studios in NY for his photography, Zoë Samels for her writing, Andrea Hull for her video work, and also Colleen Gorman, and Steve Hay for their supportive efforts.



BARTENDER, 1954 Oil on canvas 24 x 28 inches



CASKET FOR SALE, 1989 Oil on canvas 32 x 41 inches

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In “Introduction: A Life of Observation” at Greg Kucera Gallery, the artist David Byrd, once an avid collector and trader of antique bottles, offers up to viewers his own vessels of nostalgia in the form of

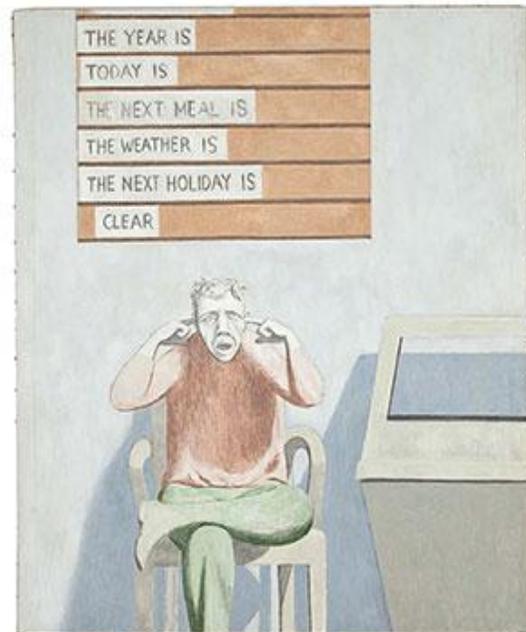


Filing Station at Night (1997), Oil on canvas

nearly one hundred oil paintings, works on paper, and wooden sculptures. Like a shelf of Byrd’s glass relics, the show is a menagerie of personal histories, a life of looking spread across four rooms. Echoing the chromatic idiom of aged Americana, the show’s palette is all rust and patina and light-bleached wood. But his haunting portraits and eerie landscapes offer more than the voyeuristic viewing of a dusty antique store. The purposeful act of recollection comes through here as well, that complicated give and take between reality and imagination that resides in the creative architecture of any given memory. Moving through the show, what we are led to observe, then, is not what Byrd has seen, but what he has remembered.

Although there are works on view from as early as the 1950s, Byrd did not devote himself to his art full-time until 1988, when he retired to Sidney Center, New York at the age of 62. Working decades after he had last seen his subjects and without the help of photographic aids, he drew upon those visual archives at his disposal: his prolific sketchbooks and his memory. Framed as a representational sample of his oeuvre, Byrd’s paintings, which make up the bulk of the show, are organized here into three thematic groupings: VA hospital (scenes from the artist’s thirty-year career as an orderly in a veteran’s psychiatric ward), landscapes, and genre scenes. The show, Byrd’s first, takes its title from the artist’s professed conviction that “painting is all about observation and experience,” a framework he both champions and deconstructs.

A kaleidoscopic archive of autobiographical snapshots, the show asks of its viewers: what are the people, places, and events that make up a life? What sort of information does a recollection hold? In Byrd’s case, he favors the familiar architecture of daily life—panoramas from his commute, intimate workplace



Patient Hearing Voices (1975), Oil on canvas

vignettes— as well as scenes organized around the expression of a particular kind of self-contained melancholy. It is through these mournful portraits, mostly of his patients with a handful from his painful childhood, that Byrd explores and exposes the perceptual limits of remembered observation. As if each painting were one of his patients, Byrd does his best to faithfully reconstruct a scene's symptoms, even if he has forgotten (or perhaps never knew in the first place) its underlying cause.



Man in Bed (1973), Oil on canvas

A conscious, constructive act of remembering is particularly striking in the large number of VA hospital paintings in view. Familiar visuals of an institutionalized life are all here: Byrd shows us medicine rations, stony-faced nurses, glowing television sets, and patients in the throes of unsettling outbursts. In *Man in Bed* (1972), the viewer looks down on a patient nearly subsumed by his bed linens, his sharply contorted limb betraying a night of restless repose. The outline of a strained body underneath the sheets once caught Byrd's eye and now demands our attention, while the specifics of the man and his surroundings have dropped away.

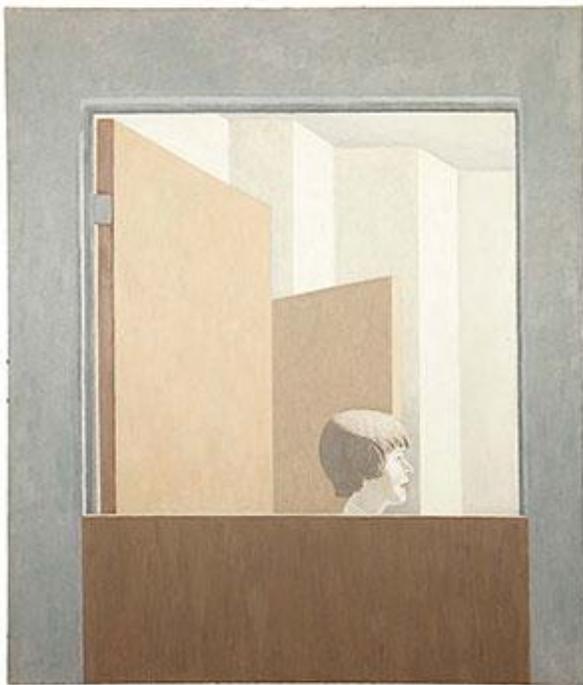
This interplay between observation and memory, where both Byrd and the viewer oscillate between the remembered past and working present, is reinforced through the artist's stylistic choices. Most of the scenes are closely cropped and oddly foreshortened, observations projected onto the cramped screen of the mind's eye. An attention to architecture is paramount across Byrd's VA hospital, landscape, and genre scenes. By the end of the show one is seduced by the works' visual coherence – it is tempting to identify a recognizable painterly style in the vein of Charles Sheeler or Alex Katz. Yet rather than fall into the trap of predictability, Byrd's artistic fidelity instead bolsters the show's confrontation with issues of



Patients Watching Television (1992), Oil on canvas

memory and observation, reinforcing the idea that these works are the remembered contents of his life and his life only, artistic antiques now brought out for display.

David Byrd's debut show is not only an introduction to this intriguing and complicated work, but an invitation for viewers to ask questions of their own life. At the heart of this work lies a universal impulse, one that seeks to explain not *what*, but *how* we remember. If we look closely enough, beneath the flattened surface of each composition the creative architecture of a given memory is revealed to us. Whether it is the deserted movie theatre of *Balcony With Screen* (1948) or the fluorescent cave of *½ Door*'s (1985) nurses' station, Byrd has created with layers of paint what we all do with words and thoughts.



½ Door (1985), Oil on canvas



Balcony With Screen (1955), Oil on canvas

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