

On the Bright Side: Tour features work of late local artist

By Allison Collins Contributing Writer, July 6, 2017



The artwork of reclusive 20th century painter and former Sidney Center resident, David Byrd is being celebrated in a multi-state show going on now through December.

Described by exhibit curator and David Byrd Estate co-manager Jessica Farrell as an “artistic pilgrimage,” the series, “David Byrd: Ten Stops,” follows Byrd’s life and art from New York to Washington and back again. Byrd died in 2013 at age 87.

The tour opened last week at the Franklin Stage Company's Chapel Hall. The second of the 10 stops, “David Bird: A Life,” opens Saturday at 2205 Pine Swamp Road in Sidney Center, the site of the wood-and-stone home built entirely by Byrd. There is no admission charge, and the home, situated on 12 acres in Delaware County, will be open Saturdays and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment.

Farrell, who began conceptualizing Ten Stops alongside co-executor Jody Isaacson after meeting Byrd in 2012, noted, “The house is opening on Saturday and we’ve been working really hard on it.” Though his home contained what Farrell described as a “really amazing, intact body of work” comprising paintings, drawings, letters, sculptures and a book that Farrell called his “magnum opus,” she said the exhibit will especially highlight about 30 of Byrd’s paintings.

“His paintings were his family,” said Farrell, adding, “They were his life.”

Much of Byrd’s work was inspired by his 30-year career as an orderly in the psychiatric ward of the Veterans Administration Medical Hospital in Montrose from 1958-1988. As such, a large portion of the body of Byrd’s work depicts the struggles of his patients.

“He developed great empathy for these men over 30 years and then he painted them obsessively,” said Farrell. “The patients are a window into the world of a forgotten population that needs to be seen.”

Reflective of this, Farrell noted that the David Byrd Estate is “committed to mental health advocacy.”

Alongside his hospital-inspired work, Farrell said “David Byrd: A Life” incorporates several of Byrd’s genre pieces, showcasing his special knack for capturing “a lot of humor and the idiosyncratic way that human beings interact,” as well as his landscapes.

“(The exhibit) includes some of his life story and certainly his years at the psych ward, but also a lot of beautiful, playful paintings of landscapes and of going to auctions in Delaware and Otsego counties,” Farrell said. “So they’ll be a few things people will recognize in this area.”

As immersed as she and Isaacson have been over the years, Farrell said, “We had a real insight into the struggles (Byrd) had, but he also wrote beautifully about Delaware County and the joy of being upstate ... and building his home.”

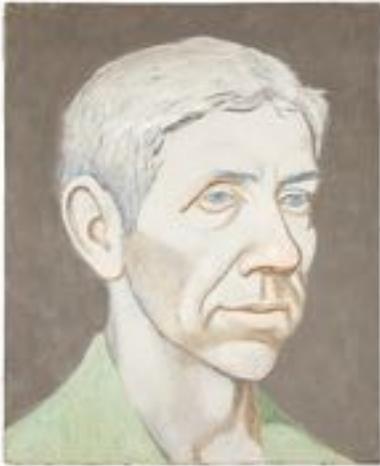
The home, constructed entirely of salvaged wood and repurposed stone, will be as much a part of the exhibit as Byrd’s artwork, said Farrell. “Not only is this about the work and showing his life, patients and Delaware County, but it’s about showing off this incredible house,” said Farrell. “It’s an unbelievable feat. The home speaks of David.”

Discussing her work with Isaacson, whom she called “very integral” and “inspiring in her dedication to the project,” Farrell said, “We made an agreement to promote and preserve his legacy and we really believe in his work and believe it should be seen.” She continued, “This has been a big endeavor ... and a very exciting project. We knew that this — David Byrd, his work, who he was — was a real treasure.”

“David Byrd: A Life” will be open weekends in Sidney Center through Sept. 30, at which time Farrell said, there will be a closing reception and auction.

For information on “David Byrd: Ten Stops,” or to view the artist-made map including all 10 stops and information on each, visit www.davidbyrdestate.com, email davidbyrdvoices@gmail.com or call 369-3059 or, on weekends, 865-5897.

David Byrd: Ten Stops



by Jessica Farrell

DAVID BYRD: Ten Stops is an art pilgrimage of ten exhibitions that illuminate the life and artistic trajectory of artist David Byrd. Byrd, who worked in obscurity for decades, created hundreds of paintings and drawings, sculptures, and a book about the people, places and situations that haunted his memory. Each exhibition in the series, including a retrospective at the home and studio Byrd designed and built in the Catskills, will highlight a specific theme and will be shown in a location that correlates to the work.

Byrd's spare compositions bring viewers close to the action, allowing them an entry to the facets of his life, including a painful childhood in foster homes in Springfield, Illinois during the Great Depression, and nostalgic street scenes of Brooklyn, NY in the early 1940's where he lived as a young man. However, Byrd's principal body of work from the psychiatric hospital in Montrose, NY reveals the lives of the mentally ill patients he cared for from 1958 – 1988. Haunting images depict both the melancholy and dull repetition of life on the ward. His daily commute to the V.A. offered him inspiration for panoramic landscapes of bridges, waterways, mountains of the Peekskill, Montrose, Cold Spring area. An avid collector of old bottles, tools, early patents and antiques, Byrd found both the artifacts and the characters that attended country auctions to be another great subject. After retiring to the Catskills, Byrd filled canvases and sketchbooks with the people and places he encountered during his weekly trips to the laundromat, grocery store, doctor's office and gas station. Multiple renderings of these everyday scenes display Byrd's fascination with gesture and posture—the humor and pathos of the busy world he observed.

In following the path laid out in *DAVID BYRD: Ten Stops*, decades of observation, memory and imagination coalesce, unveiling Byrd's efforts to understand the world around him. In Byrd's own words, "I tried to paint because I had the remote idea that it might serve me in my behavior to others." Byrd's artwork invites viewers to question the forces that shape a life, and how we, in turn, shape others' lives.

DAVID BYRD: Ten Stops maps Byrd's odyssey from Brooklyn to Peekskill and West Point, continuing north to Delhi, Franklin and Sidney Center, on to Cooperstown, with a final stop in Seattle. His body of work explores the paradox that this man, who had great difficulty establishing relationships and cloistered himself away from others, is leading a journey to better understand the human experience.