

Paintings offer window into mental illness

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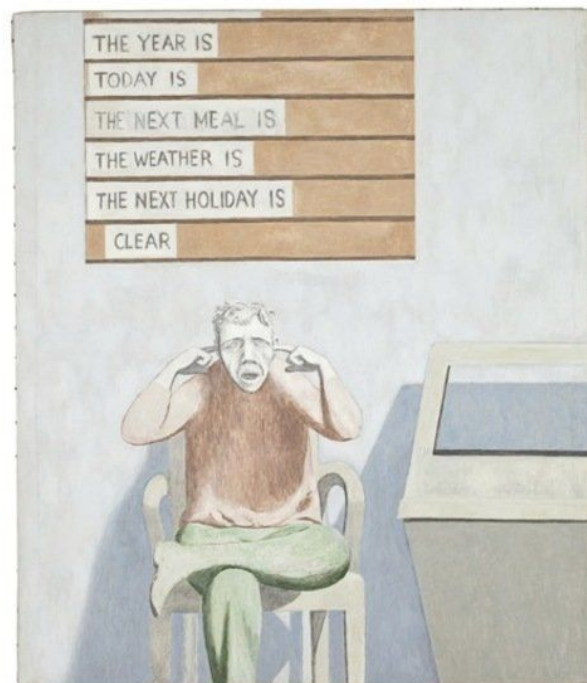
Paintings portraying scenes from an area artist's stint as an orderly at a VA hospital go on display Saturday at the Roxbury Arts Center.

The exhibit, "David Byrd: 'Voices,' Paintings from Melrose VA Hospital," will be celebrated with an opening reception from 3 to 5 p.m. Saturday in the center's Walt Meade Gallery. It will be on display through Feb. 21.

According to a media release, Byrd's paintings "(bring) the often dark world of mental illness into clarity through each stroke of the brush and choice of colors. Some stories are told through words, some through music, some through dance. Byrd's experience and understanding of mental health told his stories through paint.

"Byrd became familiar with psychosis at an early age as he saw his father deteriorate with a mental illness, to finally commit suicide. At the age of 17, he joined the Merchant Marines. After serving in World War II, Byrd was able to study art in New York City, via the G.I. Bill. But it was his next venture that set the palette for what would become his defining body of work. Byrd took a job as an orderly in the psychiatric ward at the VA Hospital in Montrose, and for 30 years cared for veterans with mental disorders. Byrd tried to paint during this time, more in the way that one would keep a journal. He had this idea that painting would help him with the way he behaved towards others," the release read. Byrd also wrote a book about his experiences titled "Montrose VA Hospital 1958-1988."

Byrd retired and built a home in the Sidney Center area. Although he had sketched and painted some while employed at the hospital, he painted mostly from memory "what he had come to know so well, first as a boy living with his father and later working at the VA Hospital. In his own words, Byrd said, 'I have found that bad jobs can produce very good pictures. Don't know what good jobs produce,'" the release explained.



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Contributed 'Patient Hearing Voices' is one of several paintings by the late David Byrd that will be on display starting Saturday at the Roxbury Arts Center.

According to Jessica Farrell, who through the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Otsego & Delaware County helped organize the Roxbury exhibit, Byrd's artwork was discovered when Farrell was introduced to Byrd by a mutual friend. Upon visiting Byrd's home, "I couldn't help but notice the stacks of canvases meticulously lined up against every available wall, several feet deep," Farrell wrote. "Like nesting dolls, large paintings hung over smaller paintings. Neatly arranged objects and sculpture revealed a one man show, surrounding the artist himself. Upon closer inspection the facets of a long, difficult life were all present in the paintings, spilling from room to room."

Farrell and Jody Isaacson became advocates for Byrd's work, displaying it locally in Sidney Center and contacting a gallery owner in Seattle to have it shown there. In 2013, despite having been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, Byrd flew to Seattle to host a gallery talk in conjunction with the opening of his exhibit, which Farrell wrote was "an amazing success." Plans were made to show Byrd's work at the State University College at Oneonta in the fall, but Byrd did not live to see the exhibit. He died May 30.

The exhibit of Byrd's work acts as a prequel to "Hope & Healing: Perspectives on Mental Illness," a day-long event with keynote speaker Jason Paden, on Saturday, Jan. 31. For more information, call 326-7908 or visit roxburyartsgroup.org.