

the Stranger

SLOG

Visual Art

So Long, David Byrd by [Jen Graves](#) • May 31, 2013 at 2:58 pm



Courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery, David Byrd, *Man Waving*, 1997, 12 by 15 inches.

It hasn't even been two months since **the world found out about David Byrd**, the artist and recluse. And now he's gone again.

David Byrd died at 12:30 am on Thursday. He'd had lung cancer that spread. He was 87. Doctors diagnosed the cancer just before his first-ever plane flight, to Seattle, for the opening of the only gallery exhibition he would ever have.

The show was at Greg Kucera Gallery in Pioneer Square. It was a dream for Byrd and a singular honor for Kucera. Byrd worried nothing would sell, that it would not be worth all the fuss. He had to be reassured along the way. The opening was, for him, a thrill beyond what he could have imagined. On the other side of the event was Kucera, who, after Byrd had flown back to his little hamlet in central New York, one day described the whole experience to me as the most successful exhibition he's ever organized.

Kucera wasn't saying Byrd was a cash cow; the pieces were modestly priced. But the sheer response was overwhelming. Word of mouth kept streams of people

running through. "Have you seen the Byrd yet?" I kept hearing people saying in galleries along the streets of Pioneer Square. And sales were a stunning surprise. Kucera, reassuring a nervous Byrd, had thought maybe 20 of the 100 paintings, drawings, and sculptures on display would end up selling. In the end, more than 75 of Byrd's 100 pieces sold.

Byrd's paintings had both soul and style. (I wrote about it [here](#).) He took as his subject matter his memories from days gone by: Nights outside the movie theater where his mother was a ticket taker when he was a child in Brooklyn. Days at the Coney Island of the 1930s. All those years of swing shifts as an orderly on the mental ward of a VA hospital.

He spent his final years in Sidney Center, in a house he'd built and stacked with his own paintings, many of them depicting the struggling patients who continued to live in his memory. He was "discovered" by another artist who happened to live nearby, Jody Isaacson. She shows at Kucera, hence the connection. She was at Byrd's bedside hours before he finally, peacefully, died.

By many measures, Byrd's late life was better than his early one. The only time I talked with him, by phone in April from the hospital where I would later learn he was being diagnosed with cancer, he was eager to talk despite the fact that he was having some trouble getting words out clearly. It was not one of his better days.

He would say something and interrupt Jody as she tried to translate it, piling words on words, trying to be understood as if he was thrilled finally to have someone listen to him after decades of keeping all of these paintings under wraps.

But when he started to talk about the paintings of the foster homes where he lived as a child, he hit a wall and all at once went silent. He then said something jumbled in a lowered voice, which Jody translated to, "He wants to talk about those Brooklyn pieces, but he just can't." Those experiences were still painfully close. The paintings *Foster Family* and *Hell of an Evening* leave chills ([here](#), scroll down).

The Kucera Gallery exhibition was beautifully arranged. Accompanying it are an extensive digital catalog of Byrd's works and a written timeline of his life. Last weekend, Kucera devoted all the space he had at a San Francisco art fair to Byrd, documented here.

Most importantly, Byrd did live to see his paintings loved.

No obituary has yet been published for Byrd, and his hometown paper is so small that one may never appear. But Kucera wrote one, so here it is, followed by an email Jody Isaacson sent out the morning Byrd died, to the people who work at the gallery and had come to know Byrd so well.

David Leonard Byrd (1926 – 2013)

The artist, David Byrd died May 30, 2013 of complications from lung cancer. His close friend and advocate, Jody Isaacson had visited him earlier that day and found him simply more and more still and at rest. His body will be cremated and his ashes dispersed over the next few years at places he loved in the larger New York area.

Byrd was diagnosed with cancer only a few days before flying to his opening at Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle. Upon returning home, Byrd had two weeks of radiation treatment at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Albany, NY. Since then he had been in hospice care at the New York State Veterans Home at Oxford, about 40 miles from his home in Sidney Center.

We were pleased to introduce the work of David Byrd, in our April-May, 2013 show, in the only gallery exhibition he had during his life. I was made aware of his work through his neighbor and fellow artist Jody Isaacson in November of last year. In January I traveled to Sidney Center to meet him and see his work in his home and studio. Upon meeting him and comprehending the range of his moving body of work, I felt as if I had been handed a wonderful opportunity, and a substantial obligation, to make a spectacular first exhibition of this artist's work.

Byrd was born in 1926 and raised in Springfield, Illinois. His life experiences included living in foster homes as a child, traveling the world as a Merchant Marine, a brief military service, and studying with the Ozenfant School of Art in New York City. From 1958-88, he worked as an orderly at the Veteran's Administration Medical Hospital, Montrose, NY, caring for psychiatric patients damaged by the world wars. This experience provided him with his defining body of paintings related to the patients' individual behaviors, general routines, and distinct personalities.

In 1988, Byrd retired from the hospital, built his permanent home (mostly by himself), and devoted himself to painting from memory, the places, people and situations he had seen in his previous lives. Byrd has a subdued palette, a minimal paint surface, and compositions with a striking inter-relationship of space and shape. His sculptures are combinations of hand-carved wood or found materials.

While not ignorant of recent art history, Byrd's work is anachronistic in that he has remained true to the period of his formation as an artist. Though he lived to be 87 years old, one senses throughout his career the concerns of the artists of the 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, untouched by the commercial world, but deserving of a place within the history of 20th century art.

The entire process of creating this exhibition has provided one of the most moving experiences of my career. From the first glimpse of the work I sensed the emotional and provocative range of it. The single painting that made me decide to show the work was simply titled "Suicide," depicting a man flying headlong downward toward his doom, his hands and fingers outstretched, the features on his face mask-like with open mouth and hollowed eyes. Not only did that painting make me want to show the work but also to buy it. And I did.

I suspect I will never again have an opportunity so filled with promise, so late in an artist's life, and then, when the artist dies so suddenly, to realize we provided the only gallery exhibition of his lifetime. I am so thankful that it turned out to be such an overwhelming experience for me and my staff and our collectors. I had promised Byrd that we would have some success with the work but I suspected we might sell twenty paintings or so. What makes it all the more startling to me is that, despite all my prior experience with unknown artists, we have sold more than seventy-five paintings from this show. Although his show at 105 works is by far the most we've ever had in one exhibition, to sell $\frac{3}{4}$ of them, is pretty astonishing.

Jody and I are committed to finding a dealer for Byrd's estate in New York. We thank David Byrd for his trust in our efforts.

Greg Kucera, May 31, 2013

From: Jody Isaacson

Date: Thu, May 30, 2013 at 5:10 AM

Finally slipped from this world this morning at 12:30 am. Jessica and I were with him yesterday and sang Happy Trails to him alongside the cowboy song CD he enjoyed. We left him earlier in the day but he had loving hands on him over the last 10 days with Steve, Tom, Colleen, Jessica and myself rotating in and out to be with him as he slowly BUT WITH SUCH A STRONG HEART slipped away. I feel at peace that he no longer is struggling. Today is sunny and humid and perfect for inviting this amazing experience to slowly sink in. Thank all of you for your love and help and interest in David. It was so meaningful to share it with you all.



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