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The Panopticon, The Pill and The Practitioner: David Byrd and Peter Gallo

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The Patients and the Doctors: David Byrd and Peter Gallo at Zieher Smith & Horton

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516 West 20th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

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David Byrd, *Waiting and Aging*, 1989. Oil on canvas, 23 x 33 inches. The Estate of David Byrd, Courtesy of Zieher Smith & Horton

The title of Zieher Smith & Horton's two-man exhibition of David Byrd and Peter Gallo, "The Patients and the Doctors," is taken from a fiery 1947 work by the poet-mental patient Antonin Artaud. The artists paired together for this exhibition both worked a number of years in mental health centers. Gathering from their experiences within modern medicine conceived as a kind of Ship of Fools run aground, their art documents the disfiguring pressures of contemporary psychological space on the body and the mind—thin skinned and gray mattered.

Raised in foster homes in Illinois, the late David Byrd (1926-2013) escaped to Brooklyn, NY at the age of 16. After serving in World War II, the G.I. Bill brought him to art school. Byrd balanced his art practice alongside a career at the Veteran's Administration Medical Hospital in Montrose, NY where, as an orderly, he cared for psychiatric patients. It is as if his paintings reiterate that care in terms of palette and rendering—the touch is light, even delicate, and the tone softly cajoling. The emaciated bodies of his subjects wander halls, slump in corridors and fall into lines. Their heads, shrunken by disease, rarely present their features, hanging heavy between shoulders or hands. Byrd's paintings seem rich with reference to madness and art—from the deranged eyes of Goya's Saturn peeking from the shadows of *Alcove*, to his own antipodal "Venus rising" in the frail, pitiful body of the nude man in *Arising*.

Byrd's paintings consistently employ a mix of the social and magical realism popular in the early to mid-20th Century. New York artists like George Tooker also dealt with the complexities of psychological space, though from within the urban space. However, the horror of Byrd's figures' physical agony is in continual contrast to the sugar glass palette that models his institutional spaces. The figures of *Waiting and Aging*, arranged across the canvas in various states of pain and boredom, are flooded with a fleshy peach light. Like the faded underpainting of a Morandi or De Chirico still life, the careful placement of these patients—paralyzed yet wilting—distills them in their communal isolation. The interiors of this psychiatric ward are startling calm in their malt pastel, fleecy geometry and impressionistic light. Indeed, in Byrd's compositions there is a great abundance of windowless light; just as there is a great abundance of mindless bodies—the window, seemingly, is closed. What remains is the body—emptied and organized by vacuum, by number.



Peter Gallo, *Guyotat*, 2015. Thread on burlap with oil on muslin, 81 x 32 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and ZieherSmith & Horton

Peter Gallo, born 1959, lives and works in Hyde Park, Vermont. In a similar way to Byrd, he has synthesized his art practice (and an art history PhD) with many years of experience as a case manager at a mental health center. However, where Byrd explored the interior of the institution and the exterior of the body, Gallo presents just the opposite through a practice he defines as "bio-aesthetics." In his doctoral thesis, "Bio-Aesthetics and The Artist as Case History," Gallo offers a bio-political lens through which to understand the various divides and *-isms* of modern art history. He locates the drive of Modernism and material specificity—

movements “toward embodiment, toward the referent ... toward the real”—in 18th-century clinical revelations of the body and later ideas on artistic subjectivity and pathology.

To look at Gallo’s work, seemingly of an outsider aesthetic, against his doctoral history brings one to wonder if he is playing patient instead of doctor. Channeling Artaud, his work often gathers what material is immediately available to him; pencil and wine make desperate letters, illegible yet sobering in their urgency. However, to take the paintings as embodiments, as subjects themselves, is vital; they are skin and bone, skeletons etched with psychic charts. His supports—bedsheets, denim and burlaps—are stretched with an aching, poignant negligence across their makeshift frames. Works such as *Glanz, der nicht trösten will, Glanz. Die Toten —sie betteln noch, Franz. (Celan)* employ his body’s own shape as templates stitched in blue—truly, these are blueprints to the mind of the poet-patient, struggling to remain against the pressures of the panopticon, the pill and the practitioner. Comprised of two loosely-joined canvases, *Guyotat* is both the most unassuming and utterly corporeal piece of the exhibition, and named for the writer Pierre Guyotat’s inter-sanitarium “anti-memoir”, *Coma*. The sedate body of stretched and stained burlap skin, lightly scarred by thread, is crowned with the muslin canvas of red and rising COMA, reversed and restricted—the hot head, the fevered mind. Balancing allegory, politics and a love of text, Gallo tugs his Ship of Fools, seen in *Blood Drive* and *Blood Galaxy*, through such historical and philosophical explorations (and implications) of the artistic body and experience or, more closely, of the body as experience.

After decades of working in isolation, Byrd’s work was only discovered at 87 years of age. Just days before his first exhibition, Byrd was diagnosed with lung cancer; he passed away just shortly after the show closed. Perhaps the late artist related, throughout most of his life, to those patients’ distilled bodies, to that well-lit yet windowless space. It is also clear that Gallo traces not only history’s mad poets and the oil slicks of Foucault, but his own mind’s stretched and pinned divination, his psyche’s sextant. The pairing of Gallo and Byrd thoughtfully explores their shared understanding of the body and mind: how they find that the embodiment of one is the emptying of the other, and how their experiences color between the sanguine light, the blood-drawn lines.



David Byrd, *Nurse, Aid, and Patient*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 13 x 17 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of David Byrd and ZieherSmith & Horton



Peter Gallo, *Glanz, der nicht trösten will, Glanz. Die Toten —sie betteln noch, Franz. (Celan)*, n.d. Oil & thread on canvas. 55 x 35 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and ZieherSmith & Horton