

TWO COATS OF PAINT

David Byrd's palpable tenderness

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Contributed by Craig Taylor / The late David Byrd's affecting show, on view at Anton Kern Gallery, revolves around what he called his magnum opus: an artist book, *Montrose VA 1958–1988*, chronicling his job as an orderly at the New York State Veterans' Home psychiatric ward. Like many artists of the twentieth century, Byrd (1926–2013) used the G.I. Bill to enroll in art school, studying at the Ozenfant School of Fine Arts in New York City. Byrd spent most of his creative life in upstate New York working in isolation. He maintained a robust studio practice, producing thousands of paintings and drawings.

On the clock, he would often generate dozens of sketches of various activities and dramas that took place on the ward. The drawings recall Daumier in their amplified social dynamics. But with Byrd, the gesture is observational, and serves as a basis for paintings completed in the studio. Amedee Ozenfant's influence shows in Byrd's subdued version of post-synthetic cubist strategies. But unlike an Ozenfantian purist still-life, which would exude cool detachment, Byrd's idiosyncratic cubist space congeals corporeal bodies and radiates empathy.



David Byrd, *Soap and Man*, 1974, oil on canvas, 30 x 23 inches

Indeed, Byrd's outlook is that of a social realist. The paintings, constructed from memory, depict patients in their environment. Scumbling and luminosity wash over the canvas by way of a staccato build-up of color, culminating at the surface and revealing a Creamsicle-like, Tiepolesque pallet. The visual effect is soothing, the psychological one humanizing. In his gentle yet focused vision, tiny oil paint dashes in the paintings translate the minute colored pencil marks in the drawings that signified what he felt as he observed the psychiatric patients.

Seeing Byrd's book displayed in vitrines at the gallery alongside paintings and sketches affords viewers rich insight into the intense humanism of this under-the-radar artist. On some pages, there are handwritten descriptions that reflect his valiant attempt to make sense of institutionalized medicine. By collating his experiences, Byrd renders an artist book a socio-political document about the tragedy of mental illness – in particular, the limits of recovery through medication. There is palpable tenderness in his approach, which seeks truth by witnessing – and to an extent, it seems, experiencing – the institutionalized obfuscation of trauma. He was one of relatively few post-World War II artists who confronted that grim reality with such directness, passion, and skill.

“David Byrd, Montrose VA, 1958-1988,” Anton Kern, 16 East 55th Street, New York, NY. Through April 3, 2021
About the author: Craig Taylor is a Brooklyn-based painter and an associate professor in the Painting Program at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he also serves as director of the Graduate Program.



David Byrd, 3 am, 1960, oil on canvas 35 x 42 inches



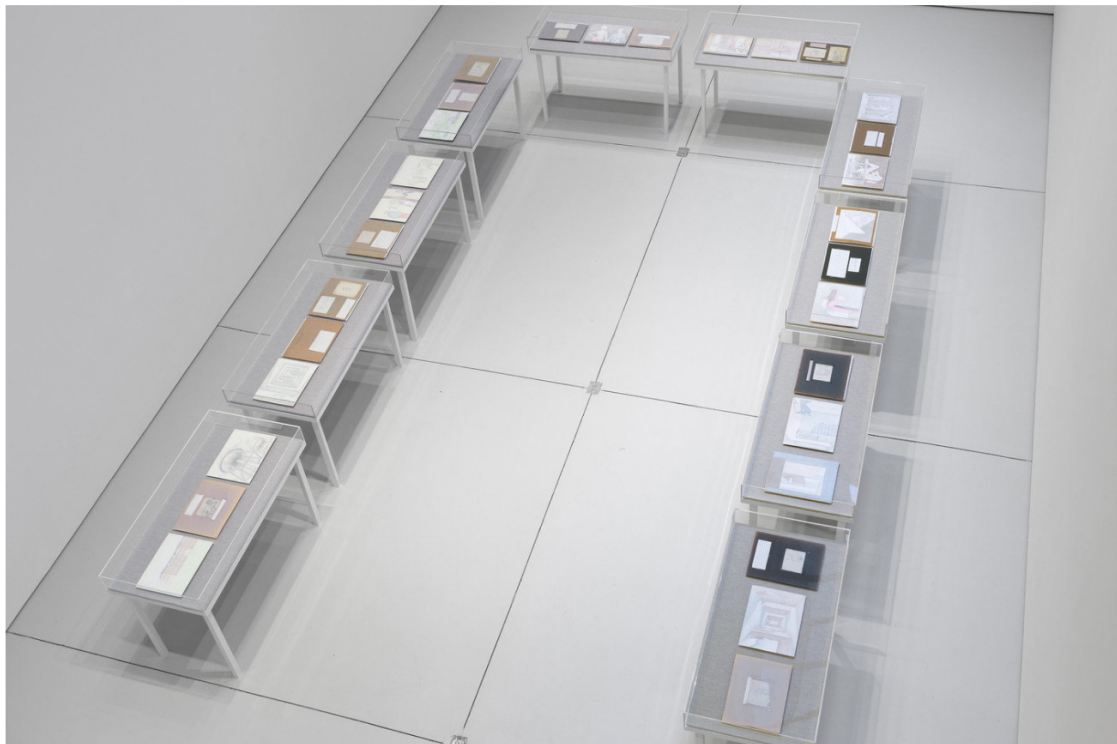
David Byrd, Under Covers, no date, oil on canvas, 28 x 32 inches



David Byrd, Unnatural Act on Ward, 1991, oil on canvas, 12 x 15 inches



David Byrd, installation view



David Byrd's magnum opus, installation view

LOOKING AT MY DRAWING AND PAINTING OF MONTROSE VA YEARS AFTER I HAD DONE THEM I HAD THE IDEA THAT MAYBE THEY WOULD MAKE A BOOK. ANY SUBJECT IS BOOK MATERIAL APPARENTLY, WAR; HIGH SOCIETY AND LOW, CONCENTRATION CAMPS, STARVATION, LIFE AND DEATH, INSANITY. THE PATIENTS AT MONTROSE ARE NOT ALL INSANE OR INCOMPETENT BUT DO HAVE EMOTIONAL, NEUROLOGICAL, PSYCHIATRIC PROBLEMS. SOME - TIMES SHORT AND ACUTE, SOMETIMES LONG TERM, PERMANANT.

PATIENTS RIGHTS ARE RELATED TO LIVING WITH A GROUP ON OPEN OR CLOSED WARDS AND MANY FACTORS SUCH AS MEDICATION AND ROUTINE AND LACK OF FREEDOM ARE THE RULE. THE KNOWLEDGE I HAVE OF THE HOSPITAL AS A WHOLE IS FROM OBSERVATION, ANECDOTE, SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND AESTHETIC. THERE WAS MUCH EMPLOYEE TURNOVER AND LIKE ANY JOB ANXIETY ONLY MORE. ^{AND CLASSES GIVEN BY NURSING EDUCATION.}

THE VA HOSPITALS STARTED AS OLD SOLDIERS HOMES BUT MORE AND MORE IT WAS FOUND THE RESIDENTS HAD MENTAL PROBLEMS SO THEY BECAME PSYCHIATRIC CENTERS FOR VETERANS. DON'T KNOW ALL THE RULES ABOUT ADMISSION ^{BEING A VETERAN IS FIRST} BUT HARMFUL TO YOURSELF OR OTHERS, CONFUSED, SERVICE CONNECTED DISABILITIES ARE

David Byrd's notes