

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.