



Suicide

1998, Oil on canvas, 30" × 40"

The Fastest Friendship I Ever Had

by Greg Kucera

It would have been easy to underestimate David Byrd upon meeting him for the first time. He was an unremarkable looking man with a short, wiry build, thinning white hair and thick glasses. He wore cheap jeans, a blue chambray shirt and an ever-present denim jacket, as if he didn't have enough imagination to do otherwise. His kind, ready smile, but slightly reserved nature, seemed typical for a small-town man in his mid-eighties. But his plain appearance belied a complex and deeply sympathetic personality. His childhood was a heartbreaking litany of paternal rejection, maternal abandonment and a disrupted, dysfunctional family. Time spent in foster homes as a child, and growing up in deprivation during the Great Depression gave way to a poverty of love later in his life. At the age of 32, David went to work as

an orderly in the psychiatric ward at a Veteran's Administration hospital in Montrose, New York. He held the worst job in the hospital, yet stayed there for thirty years, retiring on a modest pension. His early life led him to be an empathetic adult who cared deeply about the patients under his watch, and that concern showed up in his representation of these men in his paintings.

Jody Isaacson showed me his images in November 2012 and I immediately agreed to come out to view the work the following January. In particular, one painting, depicting a graceful, dramatic suicide fall had caught my attention. I wanted this painting and I wanted to show this artist.

Jody and I arrived at his home in the rural Catskills to find David shoveling snow from his steps with all the vigor of a much younger man. With jovial

hospitality, he invited us into his modest and neatly kept home, revealing the obvious care he had invested in building it himself.

Drawing my attention immediately were the multitudes of paintings. They were stacked on the floor and against bookshelves three feet deep. His other, more ingenious method of storing paintings was to hang them on the walls, one on top of another: Behind a large painting would be a smaller one; nested behind that, an even smaller work, and so on, sometimes four paintings deep. Most were smallish by contemporary art standards, from one by two feet to about four by five feet.

The paintings seemed to divide into two obvious groups: depictions of his normal life, and more harrowing views of the lives of patients in the psychiatric ward.

The first group proved to be wide-ranging, including paintings of his childhood memories, the places he lived and worked, small-town settings and the landscapes surrounding them. Notably, there was a touching image of David as a child standing in front of a movie marquee for *The Amazing Fu Manchu* while his mother sits, hands clasped, behind the glass walls of a ticket booth. It was as touching a painting about the unavailability of maternal love as I have ever seen.

The largest category of work revealed the tragic lives of the mentally ill patients he cared for at the V.A. hospital. Some were straightforward portraits, while others appeared to be case studies in the psychological states of the mentally disturbed.

There were also views of the daily lives of the patients, from pill-taking routines to shower rituals, and from the moments of their waking trances through their disturbed sleep. The images convey the dull repetition and hopelessness of these lives damaged during wartime, notably the Vietnam War.

In curating the show, I chose ninety paintings, twenty drawings and three sculptures. As I chose work I wanted, I attempted to sort it into categories

of hospital, landscape, and his life. While each category had a huge range of work within it, what seemed to be most consistent among all the paintings was the color palette of grayed pastel. Almost regardless of when they were painted, most of these were memory paintings, often rendered years after the depicted event had happened. They were finely painted in the style of the Social Realists of the 1940s, with great attention paid to emotional states, as well as composition and the interaction of positive and negative shapes.

David explained that his two-year training at the Ozenfant School of Art in New York City had been fairly academic and old-fashioned. Although he was not a disciple of Amédée Ozenfant, Ozenfant was his most important teacher. Aside from David's painting techniques, it showed in his canvas stretching. He was taught to pull the canvas only to the back edge of the stretcher bars, make very tidy "hospital corners" and then neatly secure the edges every few inches with small black tacks. He did not fold the canvas over the back edge or use a staple gun.

If I asked him about a painting, he would generally say, "Well, that could have been done better," or "That one needs a little work" in some specific area. He was eager to tell us details about making the work; slower to share the deeply personal.

After making my selections, we sat down to discuss the logistics and strategies for our exhibition. While David believed greatly in his own work, he had little faith that any good would come from our show. Nothing in his life so far had left him confident that anyone would understand his work or be willing to buy it.

When told I wanted him to come to Seattle for the opening, he said he was afraid that if he attended the opening, "people would say mean things" to him about the paintings.

David's constant question was, "Can you guarantee me that they will sell?" When I said I would buy some myself he refused. As eager as he was to show and to sell, he didn't want anyone to offer him charity.

Instead, his method was to strike a very hard bargain, perhaps a skill learned in his years as a bottle collector and trader. In his mind, it was reasonable that I should assume every cost for shipment of work, framing, even his travel. I agreed to all his demands.

As my staff and I installed David's exhibition we were excited to see the range of sizes, formats and thematic content. We began to understand how emotionally moving this whole enterprise with David was in our own reactions to the work and in our clients' enthusiasm. I had never seen anything like it in terms of sales for an unknown artist.

In the week before the opening, David was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer but he still came to Seattle. On Thursday, April 4th, as the opening started, Jody brought in David, aided by a walker. We transferred him to a rolling office chair to show him how we had arranged his work. He was quietly effusive and it was obvious he hadn't yet had a clear idea of how his show was going to look or feel.

By that point, we had sold about twenty paintings. With many of those paid for in full, we presented David with an envelope full of checks. I relished the surprised look on his smiling face as he opened the envelope and saw physical evidence of purchases for the first time.

We introduced David to clients, and he charmed them. Collectors were eager to know stories behind particular paintings. Other artists congratulated him on his work. People of all ages, having read the advance press, were there to wish him well and tell him how inspiring his story was to them. Gradually, it dawned on him that everyone was there for him and not against him.

David did a walk-through of the show that Saturday at noon. He came in using his walker and stayed with it. He told the crowd of about 80 people, "I don't have much to say. The paintings

speak for themselves." But talk he did, going from room to room, speaking about almost every work in some way or another.

The crowd loved listening to him and stayed with him throughout. The scheduled thirty-minute talk lasted more than an hour, with many direct questions about his life and work. I checked his energy level at several points but it didn't flag until he was done talking, tired but truly thrilled.

After David returned to New York, we spoke a few times as sales progressed in the following weeks. With each call his spirit seemed to calm further as his anxieties and fears dissipated. Within weeks after our show closed, David died in his sleep.

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In the few months since David's death, my staff and I have had several very moving conversations about the gravity of our work for David and what it meant to him to have us supporting him and believing in his art.

I returned to David's home in July to help Jody with his estate. As we were moving things around to look for the remainder of his sketchbooks and legal papers, we discovered a few surprises.

Stored carefully on racks in his upstairs closet, David had a collection of stylish shirts, trousers, jackets and shoes from the 1940s and 1950s with labels reading Brooks Brothers, Alexander's and Harris Tweed—as if he hadn't quite given up on them, and had archived them for his later enjoyment.

There were also a few more recently acquired boxes filled with chambray shirts and denim jeans from an auction of remainders. It was a bit strange to reconcile his two styles, having only known the self-effacing, modest David Byrd in his mid-eighties and not the rake he must have been as a younger man. Such is the mystery of David Byrd.