

Seeing What is There: David Byrd at Martin-Mullen Art Gallery

by Zoë Samels

David Byrd's show *Seeing What is There* at SUNY Oneonta's Martin-Mullen Art Gallery presents the evidence of a life spent looking: dozens of pencil sketches, oil paintings and even a few mixed-media sculptures that all take their subjects from an archive of lived experiences. Moving through the gallery, we join Byrd in his watching. His close-cropped compositions bring us right to the edge of the action and, undetected, we observe grooming rituals in *Lavatory at Nighttime* and peer at the open book on the woman's lap in *Porch*. Addressing the idea of an 'honest look' at the world around him through a variety of mediums, Byrd reveals to us a belief that observation and experience are interchangeable modes of artistic production.



Making Bed in Coal Country
2002, Oil on canvas, 20" × 24"



Making Bed
Pencil on paper, 12" × 9"



Agway
1996, Oil on canvas, 20" × 24"



Agway
Pencil on paper, 12" × 9"

Like the antiques auctioneers he often painted, Byrd mined the past—in this case his own—for objects worthy of the present. His paintings and drawings jump back and forth across time, from his unhappy childhood to his thirty-year career as an orderly on a V.A. psychiatric ward. The power of these unsettling, sometimes bizarre scenes is palpable, and we are all guilty of artistic rubbernecking in front of a work like *Making Bed in Coal Country*. The gun, the bed, the blue car—what have we stumbled upon?

Even Byrd's take on the landscape genre feels like a peek behind the curtain. *Agway*, which appears in the show in both drawing and painting form, is a nighttime view of a deserted highway gas station. Vague architectural forms dominate the background, and the pumps stand at attention as we survey the scene. The lights are on, but who is there? Rather than leave us a contextual trail of breadcrumbs to make sense of the scene, he concedes the limitations of his own viewpoint and the uncertainty of bearing witness.

Byrd's most ambitious work draws on his years as an orderly, where confronting the psychological toll of modern warfare was just another day on the job. Both *Man with Mirror* and *Alcove* feature patients in distress, their pain evident but generating from an unknown source. His skill for drawing universal emotions out of specific happenings is most striking here. For while these hospital scenes are among his most alien in subject, they succeed in eliciting a purely human response, and Byrd's empathy towards his complicated subjects is obvious.

Where do we go from here? At times these works threaten to remain a kaleidoscope of shock-value snapshots, too anchored in autobiography to be relatable. Like a recollection recounted or a dream described, something has been lost in the retelling and now we are on the outside, too, left watching Byrd looking at the world. Perhaps, then, it is more productive to turn the tables on Byrd. What can we observe about this artist through his work? After all, the room is filled with the people, places and events that filled his life, and the architecture of his memory is there to be examined. What emerges from such a reading is an artist with a Faulknerian reverence for the import of the past on the present. Byrd was determined to dig up every moment of meaning he had experienced in his long life and set it to canvas or paper, thus equating recollection with re-creation. His endgame was to share with the world what he had seen, proving that a solipsistic existence can be inherently generous. The past wasn't past for David Byrd, and he wanted to show it to you.

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Woman Reading
2008, Oil on canvas, 20" × 24"



Woman Reading, Self Portrait, Landscape
Pencil on paper, 11" × 14"