

David Byrd

by Nicholas Heskes



Installation view: *David Byrd*, White Columns, New York, 2019. Courtesy White Columns, New York. Photo: Marc Tatti.

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David Byrd at White Columns is the painter's first solo exhibition in New York City—if a posthumous one. David Byrd died in 2013 at the age of 87 in Oxford, New York. Since then his paintings have gradually received attention, resulting in a number of exhibitions in recent years: a solo exhibition at Fleisher Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia (2018); a four-artist exhibition at Balice Hertling in Paris (2018 – 2019); and another solo exhibition of landscape paintings at Anton Kern Gallery, coinciding with the exhibition at White Columns. This seems like overdue attention, though Byrd himself may have been satisfied with his relative obscurity so long as he could continue painting uninhibited. In 2012 he said of his life: "For 70 years my life has mostly been bad jobs, like most everyone else, and occasionally drawing and painting, except now, being retired and having built my house to paint in, I am free. I have found that bad jobs can produce very good pictures. Don't know what good jobs produce." Byrd's melding of art and life sounds like it would be anathema to the proponents of careerism in contemporary art, which may be part of his importance today.

From 1958 to 1988 Byrd worked as an orderly in the psychiatric ward at the VA hospital in Montrose, NY, where he observed and painted the mannerisms and interactions of the patients there. As a veteran himself, having joined the Merchant Marines at age 17 before being drafted into the US Army, he likely found a suitable subject for his keen observational skills in those recovering from the traumas of war. After serving in World War II he attended the Dauphin School of Art in Philadelphia before continuing his studies in New York under the French cubist painter Amédée Ozenfant. He developed a palette and technique influenced by European Modernism and the American painter George Tooker. The soft light that permeates each picture betrays his debt to Tooker, but Byrd's striking stylistic contribution to this lineage lies in his dry brush technique. Using only small thin brush strokes to represent very high contrast light and shadow, the specificity of people and places appears washed away, leaving every figure like a ghost and every scene like a fading memory.

In *Auctioneer* (1970) a patient gesturing with their hands stares intently at some hidden world between their cupped hand, middle finger, and forefinger. The face is distorted and appears brutalized. This eerie, mysterious image is representative of the solitude and ghost like quality of each subject. Similarly, *Angry Man* (2011) and *In Hallway* (2000) maintain this quality but reflect more anxiety. In *Angry Man* (2011) a man is seen from behind running head first into a dead end, his tense arms swinging in a mindless rage. *In Hallway* (2000) depicts a pensive youth with arms folded in an empty hallway surrounded by open doors.



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Each picture represents a person, a symptom, and a diagnosis. Byrd explained his motivations thus: “I tried to paint because I had the remote idea that it might serve me in my behavior to others.” Behavior to others as an aim has its implications. Reflected in his depictions of heavily medicated patients doubled over, wandering isolated through light filled empty hallways, is an empathy derived from close observation of behavior. As an orderly, someone that is for all intents and purposes invisible, Byrd was able to relate to those who, like himself, were invisible in society.

Two paintings that stand out for their precision and subtlety are *Pool Players*(n.d.) and *Table by Door* (1969). A man is bent over a pool table preparing to hit the cue ball, another figure who seems to be evaporating, stands to the left of him; but the melancholy pool player is not in fact using a pool stick, merely holding a ball in his right hand and a stub in his left. He's only pretending, and the man standing beside him might only be a hallucination. *Table by Door* (1969) is in a different way an even more striking representation of mental illness. An open door is blocked by a table, light emanating from the doorway fills the dark hallway outside. It is up to the viewer's speculation why the table is blocking the door, but it represents the awkward obstruction to thought and movement in a psychiatric ward. My grandfather was a WWII veteran with schizophrenia hospitalized in Long Island during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is strange to think that under different circumstances he could have appeared as a shadow stalking the halls in one of Byrd's pictures.

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