

Matthew Brown

David Byrd
712 N La Brea Ave
February 22 – March 30, 2024



David Byrd
Alcove, n.d.
Oil on canvas
28 x 34 in
71.1 x 86.4 cm

Matthew Brown is pleased to present an exhibition of works by David Byrd (1926–2013), curated in close collaboration with the artist's Estate. Featuring twenty-one paintings, eleven sketchbook drawings, and a selection of thirty pages from his handmade book manuscript, the exhibition chronicles Byrd's thirty-year career working in the psychiatric ward of the Montrose, New York veterans affairs hospital, and over fifty years living in upstate New York. This is the first exhibition of David Byrd's work in California.

Byrd was born in Springfield, Illinois in 1926. Abandoned by his father, who suffered from mental illness, and left with his mother who lacked the means to support the family, he spent the majority of his childhood in foster care. Byrd traveled from home to home until he turned seventeen, when he joined the Merchant Marines during the Second World War. Upon his return to New York, Byrd landed at the Ozenfant School of Art, studying under

Amédée Ozenfant, a Parisian painter influenced by Paul Signac and Le Corbusier. However, Byrd was unable to find any traction as a painter and was left to work odd jobs in the city. He spent time working as a delivery man, janitor, liquor store clerk, movie house usher, and bartender at a Coney Island resort.

In 1958, David Byrd settled near Montrose, New York, forty miles north of Manhattan on the east bank of the Hudson River. Seeking a profession that would afford him the freedom to draw and paint, he became an orderly in the psychiatric ward of the Montrose Veterans Affairs Medical Center, where he spent his days caring for veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War suffering from mental illness. Observing and internalizing their daily routines—gathering in groups, lining up for their medication, showering, and sitting in agonized solitude—the patients became his muses. Though he kept small sketchbooks with him, Byrd's paintings were often drawn from memory.

In *Agonized*, painted in 1970, a lone figure sits uncomfortably in a chair with their arms extended, legs contorted, fingers clenched and head thrust back. Rendered with layers of washed out whites, grays, blues, and browns, Byrd utilized repetitious and deliberate brushwork to capture the pain coursing through the patient's body. The ambiguity in the figure is a nod to Byrd's embrace of memory, and the surreality that can stem from recollection.

Byrd retired in 1988 and settled in Sidney Center, a hamlet in New York's Catskills region, where he built his own house and studio and worked full-time on his artwork. While he led a mostly solitary life, Byrd developed a deep relationship with his immediate surroundings and local community. Trips into town provided inspiration, leading to drawings and paintings of the neighborhood laundromat, grocery store, and gas station, as well as the local parks, landscapes, and architecture. An avid bottle collector, he became a mainstay at regional bottle shows and antique auctions, and often made paintings and drawings of these events. The 2002 painting, *Man Receiving Bids*, depicts one of these auctions and its cast of characters: a disgruntled auctioneer, a rogue auction assistant, and frustrated bidders. Signature elements of Byrd's soft line and palette are accompanied by surrealist elements of space enhanced by the auctioneer's shadow and the skewed scale of the building.

In the final decade of his life, Byrd devoted himself to creating a handmade manuscript chronicling his thirty years as a hospital orderly. Composed of old graphite sketchbook drawings, colored pencil recreations of his paintings, and original handwritten text, the book is a written monument to his time at the VA, layering images of the daily routines and suffering that he witnessed, alongside written observations on mental illness and its treatment. Of the book's 218 pages, thirty are on view in this exhibition.

Byrd died of cancer in 2013, just weeks after attending the sole gallery exhibition of his work during his lifetime. Over the more than fifty years he lived in upstate New York, few people were aware that his paintings and drawings existed. Although he worked in isolation, outside of the expanding contemporary art world, Byrd had a studied appreciation of art history. In developing his singular and unique vision, he employed an earthy palette of browns, grays, greens, and whites that resemble those used by Giorgio Morandi; painted ambiguous figures in structured compositions that recall Georges Seurat; and employed mysterious realism in the tradition of Edward Hopper. David Byrd ultimately created hundreds of paintings and drawings in his lifetime, undeterred by the relative lack of recognition his work received. He was an artist who painted because he needed to paint. In his own words, painting was to Byrd a form of self improvement: "I tried to paint because I had the remote idea that it might serve me in my behavior to others."

David Byrd was an American painter born in Springfield, Illinois, in 1926. He died in Oxford,

New York in 2013.

Solo exhibitions include Art Basel Kabinett, Basel (2023); Drawings: Genre, Landscape, and Studies in Alienation, Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia (2021); David Byrd, Montrose VA 1958-1988, Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, and Anton Kern Gallery, New York (2021); Anton Kern Gallery, New York (2019); White Columns, New York (2019); Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia (2018); Coming Alive: Drawings and Paintings, Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle (2017); On and Off the Ward: David Byrd Paints Montrose, V.A., The Field Gallery, Peekskill, NY (2017); Auction Action, Art Garage, Cooperstown, NY (2017); Flicks, Bouts, Blocks, Studio 10, Brooklyn, New York (2017); A Life, David Byrd Home & Studio, Sidney Center, New York (2017); War is Always with Use, St. Catherine University, St. Paul, MN, and Edgewood College Gallery, Madison, WI (2015); ADAA: The Art Show, Park Ave Armory, New York, NY (2015); Seeing What is There, Walt Meade Gallery, SUNY-Oneonta, NY (2013); and A Life of Observation, Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle (2013).

Select group exhibitions include The Moth and the Thunderclap, Stuart Shave Modern Art, London (2023); Blind Field, curated by Matt Bollinger, 1969 Gallery, New York (2022); Splendid Isolation, S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium (2022); In Resonance with David Byrd, Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia (2021); The Winter Exhibition, Winter Street Gallery, Edgartown, MA (2020); Small Painting, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago (2019); Balice Hertling, Paris (2018); West Point Museum, West Point, NY (2018); and Sanctuary: a refuge or safe place, Smithy Gallery, Cooperstown, NY.

Byrd's work is included in the public collections of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, and the RISD Museum, Providence, RI.

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