

DAVID BYRD

WAR IS ALWAYS WITH US

CURATED BY CAROL LEE CHASE

THE CATHERINE G. MURPHY GALLERY AT ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY
NOVEMBER 2 – DECEMBER 18, 2015

David Byrd's paintings let us into a world that was once hidden deep behind walls. The institutions and mental hospitals of the past were bleak places where the mentally and physically handicapped were removed from society, often heavily medicated and basically locked away. David Byrd worked for 30 years in such a place: the Montrose VA Hospital in New York State. What distinguished him from the other orderlies is that Byrd was an artist; he was able to find great expression through his observations of the veterans that were housed in this oppressive and discouraging environment. He had the artistic ability to capture the essence of their lives as they struggled through their days in the isolation of the institution's hallways, bathrooms and waiting rooms.

The paintings in this exhibition illustrate Byrd's empathy and understanding for these veterans. Byrd captures their pain and disassociation through their body language. Each individual has their own distinct movement or pose. It's difficult to look away from the concentrated effort of pulling off one's trousers or trying to figure out what to do in a hallway. The paintings are portraits of men in all stages of undress and vulnerability. Even one's bed sheets become a battleground of distress, confusion and imprisonment.

Byrd uses a high key range of color. His darks are mid tones and the overall effect portrays a bleached out, fluorescent environment. There are no darks and brooding shadows in which to hide. We see everything. His brushwork is active; it flickers over the surface of the painting. The compositions are strict like the architecture of the interiors. People are often silhouetted against vast neutral walls and spaces, while others are confined in geometric mazes. All of these strategies add up to a powerful yet delicate painting style.

My good friend and colleague, Jody Isaacson, introduced me to David Byrd's paintings. We are fortunate to have this exhibition here at the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery. Please take the time to look at Byrd's book and to watch the video that features David Byrd in his home.

-Carol Lee Chase, Art/Art History Department Chair and Associate Professor

Many thanks to:

- the staff of the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery: Administrative Assistant Ann Buchen, Gallery Technician Kimberlee Roth and Gallery Director Kathy Daniels for their patience and expertise in installing exhibitions
 - The CGM Gallery Committee and my colleagues in the Art and Art History Department
 - David Wells, Gallery Director at Edgewood College in Madison, WI for transporting the work here
 - The Estate of David Byrd for providing us with the opportunity to exhibit the paintings
- and kudos to Jody Isaacson for discovering David Byrd. May his memory live on through his paintings under her stewardship.