

A Psych Ward-Inspired Trove of Outsider Art Finally Sees the Light

David Byrd's hundreds of haunting oil paintings, inspired by his job at a psychiatric ward of a VA hospital, were hidden from the public for decades, until a visit from a neighbor led the then-87-year-old outsider artist to land his first gallery show.



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David Byrd, "Patients into Dining Room" (1989), oil on canvas, 15 x 19 inches (all images courtesy Fleisher/Ollman and the David Byrd Estate; all photos by Tom Gorman, 2013)

PHILADELPHIA — In the fall of 2012, Jody Isaacson, an artist living in the hamlet of Sidney Center, New York, drove by a neighbor's house a mile up the road. For a few years, Isaacson had seen metal sculptures in the house's yard and wondered if the owner was an artist. That day, she saw an old man standing in the driveway and stopped the car. His name was David Byrd. "Are you an artist?" Isaacson asked. "I don't know if I'm an artist," Byrd replied, "but you can come into my house and let me know."

Inside were hundreds of canvases that Byrd had painted over the course of more than sixty years — complex in their allure, disquieting and rarely shown to strangers. Standing among the paintings in a house that Byrd built himself, Isaacson says that she felt like crying. "I've never seen such a collection of work ... It was an out of body experience."

Six months later, Byrd had his first solo exhibit at Seattle's Greg Kucera Gallery, where Isaacson is represented. He was 87 years old. To get to the show's opening, the Illinois-born artist flew on a plane for first time in his life — just days after being diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. In May of 2013, a few weeks after the show closed, Byrd passed away. Nearly all of his paintings at Kucera had sold.



David Byrd, "Awoken Person" (1984), oil on canvas

Trained as a modernist in New York City in the late 1940s under the French cubist Amédée Ozenfant, Byrd was a life-long recluse who worked outside the purview of the art world. From the late 1950s until the late 1980s, the artist eked out a living as an orderly at the psychiatric ward of the Veterans' Administration Medical Hospital in Montrose, New York. A keen and sensitive observer of the VA hospital's patients — soldiers who fought during WWII, Korean War and Vietnam — Byrd made the psych ward one of the primary subjects of his art, continuing to paint its patients, rooms and routines from memory for another quarter of a century after retirement.

“I painted a lot ... because I had this job that I didn't like and I was trying to get it out of my system,” he recalled in a video interview.

Over 35 of Byrd's paintings are now on view at the Fleisher-Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia.

Painted thinly with a dry brush and a muted palette, the works are displayed unframed with tack nails running along the sides of the canvas. About a third of the images grapple with Byrd's experience at the VA hospital. Set inside confined institutional spaces — corridors, rec rooms, cafeterias, shower rooms and bathrooms — the paintings show men standing in line for food or medications, dressing, showering or morphing into eerie accretions of cloth inside their beds.



David Byrd, “Laundromat Sketch” (2013), oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

Warped, cockeyed, and geometrically unhinged, Byrd's alienated human figures — whether inpatient or on the outside — are often at odds with gravity itself. They stoop, prop themselves up or sprawl out on the floor, their shoulders hunched lower than Picasso's "Old Guitarist." There are no portraits and no close ups. Spaces entrap with sparse perspectives dead-ending into blank walls. Reified by madness, medications, and a system of power that keeps them in a state of docility, the patients resemble Giorgio Morandi's contorted still lifes.



David Byrd, "Enigma" (1960), oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches

Outside the hospital, Byrd's universe can be no less disturbing. In "Overpass," a pair of human figures stand on a concrete dam teetering over the abyss. In "Walkers on a Bridge," a couple pushes a stroller high up above the ground. The stroller has no wheels and slides surreally through the air. Other erasures abound. In "Rocking Chair," the chair supporting the reclining figure is patently absent. The face goes missing in "Enigma," leaving a one-eyed, mouthless Other struggling to wriggle out of its clothes.

Byrd's paintings of Sidney Center's residents, whom he observed on his trips into town, emanate a similar air of entrapment and disconnection. For me, the most compelling of such scenes is Byrd's "Great American." Three figures carrying paper bags, elongated like Giacometti's figures, cross an empty parking lot without line stripes. Behind them looms a grocery store called "Great American." Eggs are on sale for 99 cents, yams for 58 cents. The sky is a creamy, cloudless, humid void. The paint is so oversaturated with white that the three shoppers seem on the verge of disappearing into the light, as if casting their sharp shadows for the last time.

Byrd's oeuvre has been enlisted to raise awareness for mental illness, despite of the fact that his subjects look effaced by the system that manages their care. Yet his work also doesn't amount to a critique of psychiatric power and the medical gaze. (In his *Montrose VA 1958–1988* notebook, a facsimile of which is on view at the gallery, Byrd sides with the doctors and nurses as much as he sympathizes with the patients.) For Byrd, the psych ward was synonymous with the world. Professing Bedlam's ubiquity, his paintings celebrate the triumph of artistic over institutional commitment and bring attention to those who struggle in obscurity to reveal the world in a novel light.



David Byrd, "Great American" (1999), oil on canvas, 22 x 28 inches

“For 70 years my life has been mostly bad jobs,” Byrd writes in his artist’s statement. “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.”



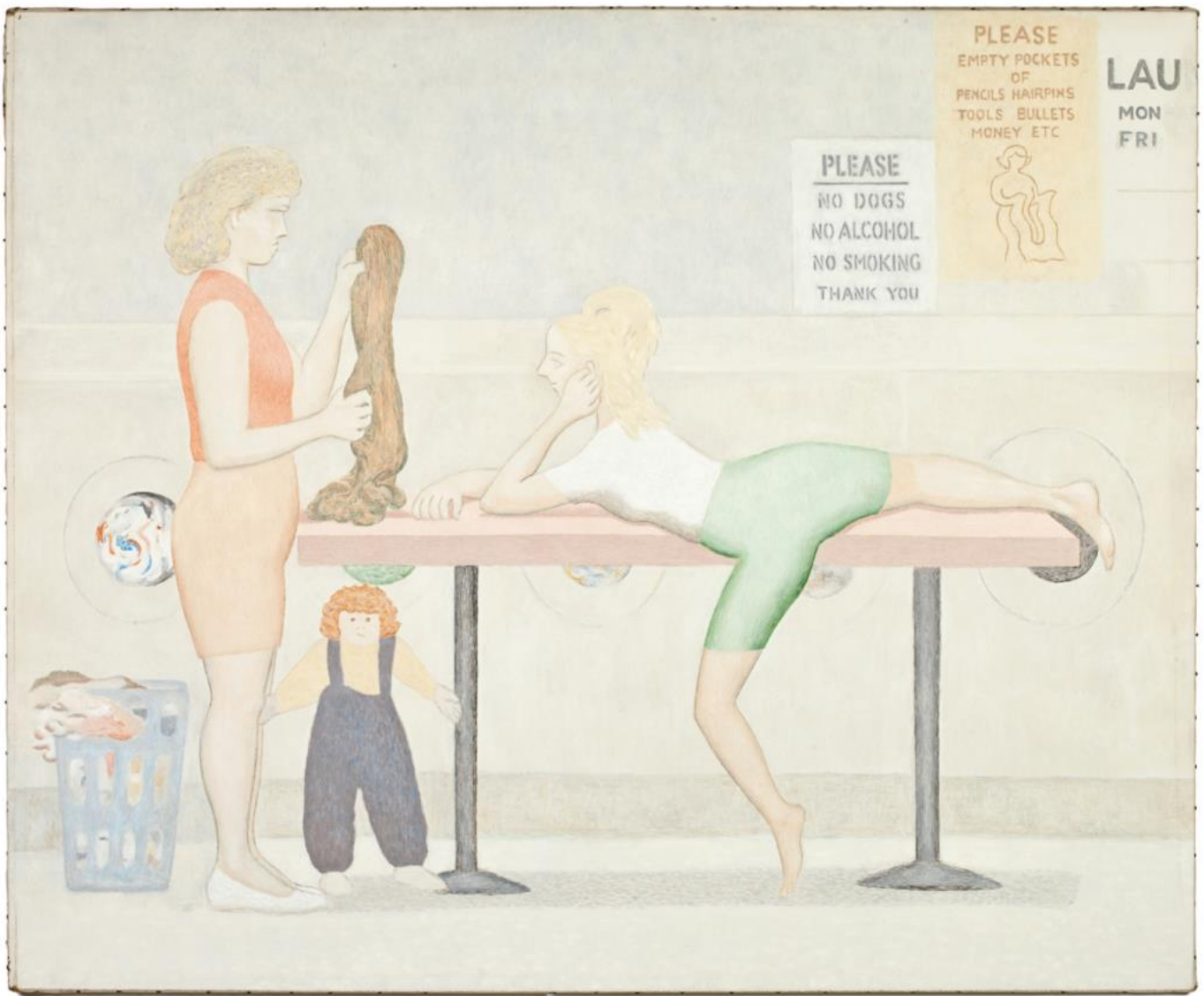
David Byrd, “Pulling” (1970), oil on canvas, 29 x 22 inches



David Byrd, "Machine Closures" (2006), oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches



David Byrd, "Woman Stooping" (2013), oil on canvas, 22 x 20 inches



David Byrd, "Woman on Laundromat Table" (n.d.), oil on canvas, 42 x 51 inches



“Filling Station in Rain” (n.d.), oil on canvas, 15 x 18 inches



David Byrd, "Alcove" (n.d.), oil on canvas, 28 x 34 inches



David Byrd, "Laughing Woman" (2010), oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches

David Byrd: Patient Pondering is on view at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery (1216 Arch Street, 5A, Philadelphia, PA) through November 10, 2018.