

Anton Kern Gallery

David Byrd

Bad jobs can produce very good pictures

October 30 – December 21, 2024

I don't know what school of painting I am in, or if any. It doesn't matter to me because I have some talent for likeness and I stick to that. And I find all of my restlessness in life can be put into a composition on canvas or expressed in sculpture. I like all kinds of art, meaning that which is produced esthetically, knowingly or unknowingly. I have held onto my work until now (I have given several pictures away, but never managed a show) never thought about making a living from it after attempting several times to break into the art market.

I was enrolled in a life class at the YMCA in Springfield, Illinois, at the time they took my brothers and sisters under their control. The Children Service Logan I think it was called. From then till now (70 years) it has been mostly bad jobs, like everybody else and occasionally drawing and painting, except now being retired and having built my home 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, October 2012



David Byrd, *Outer World*, n.d., Oil on canvas,
20 x 26 inches (50.8 x 66 cm)

Anton Kern Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of works by David Byrd (1926 – 2013) coinciding with the release of Volume 1 of the late American artist's catalogue raisonné.

Occupying the third floor gallery, this presentation aims to illuminate the interconnections between Byrd's paintings, drawings, and assemblage sculptures, and provide a glimpse into his creative process. Special attention is paid to the portraits Byrd sketched on notepaper while on the job and painted years later, of the men and women at the Veterans' Affairs hospital in Montrose, NY, where he worked as an orderly from 1958 – 1988. The exhibition also includes paintings of the landscapes he passed on his daily commute to and from work, and scenes of small town life in Sidney Center where he would do his grocery shopping, laundry, and stop for gas. The exhibition is capped by Foster Family, one of the largest scale paintings from Byrd's output, which includes vignettes representing memories from his childhood, accompanied by a smaller painting depicting the skyline of Springfield, IL, the city where he was born.

Excerpts from the artist's handwritten letters to friends and family, and captions from his manuscript provide additional context for the works and narrative information about the reclusive artist's day-to-day life. The title of the exhibition is taken from the final line of Byrd's artist statement ("I have found that bad jobs can produce very good pictures. Don't know what good jobs produce.") highlighting both Byrd's practical nature and dedication to a lifetime of picture making.

David Byrd (1926 – 2013) was an American painter who lived and worked in isolation. He used the GI Bill to enroll at the Ozenfant School of Fine Arts in New York City, where he studied under the French painter Amédée Ozenfant. He worked for 30 years as an orderly in the psychiatric ward at a VA Hospital to cover his bills and (more importantly) allow him time to paint. His experiences there inspired a 200-page manuscript which he considers his magnum opus. This poignant compilation expresses the artist's perspective as a veteran himself, and his sensitivity toward those living with trauma.

Byrd's style bears influence from different art historical periods: from European Post-Impressionism to Modernism and Cubism, to American Realism and Regionalism. He injects realistic portrayal with fantasy, creating an unsettling psychology to the otherwise tranquil compositions. His work was not publicly exhibited until months before his death at age 87.