

David Byrd

Exhibition at DANIEL BLAU

November 2, 2023 - January 16, 2024

DANIEL BLAU, at its Maximilianstraße gallery, is pleased to present an exhibition of seven exceptional paintings by American painter David Byrd, spanning a period from the 1980s to 2008.

Byrd was born in Springfield, Illinois in 1926. He joined the Merchant Marines as a teenager and was subsequently drafted into the US Army during the Second World War. His service as an artilleryman permitted him to take advantage of the G.I. Bill for his studies, which he briefly pursued at the Dauphin School of Art in Philadelphia before transferring to the Ozenfant School of Fine Arts in New York City.

His academics behind him, Byrd spent most of the 1950s working a variety of jobs, all of which had one thing in common: a minimal demand on Byrd's time, allowing him plenty of opportunity to paint. He worked as a janitor and a postman, at a bar and a cinema, before, in 1958, taking work as an orderly in the psychiatric ward of the Veterans Administration Medical Hospital in Montrose, New York. Over the following thirty years, Byrd took his experiences there and, very quietly, immortalized them. The unusual images of poignant potency he created, imbued with the disquieting atmosphere of the institution, have become his best-known work. Byrd's very particular, distinctive style of painting – simple, flat shapes, executed in pale pastel tones – is employed with a keen sensitivity and melancholy tenderness in the artist's recollections of the patients he has seen, of their inner struggles with the trauma of war and its aftermaths.

Byrd's genius lends to all of his paintings, including those depicting people and encounters outside of the hospital, a very particular aura; through his handling of faces and their features, and the overall simplicity of his compositions, he evokes a sense of tension and psychological separation between subject and viewer. Nevertheless, a certain warmth is betrayed in his more sober scenes: his compassion is unmistakable in the softness of his small, countless brushstrokes, in the visible care and sensitivity with which the artist made them.

Following his retirement in 1988, Byrd bought a house in Sidney Center, New York, where he lived in relative seclusion until his death in 2013. The first professional exhibition of his work had taken place earlier that same year, at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle; his character and lifestyle meant that the artist rarely showed his art to others, so it was only thanks to a happenstance discovery by a neighbor, and only in 2012, that it came before the public eye at all. A host of exhibitions followed, at various galleries and institutions including the West Point Museum. Today, the artist's estate is represented by the Anton Kern Gallery, where his work continues to be exhibited.

The seven works currently displayed at DANIEL BLAU cover a long period of Byrd's creative career, so differences in Byrd's visual language when dealing with different themes can be quite clearly recognized. "Woman in Car, Filling Station," from around 1981, distinguishes itself in the artist's attention to a setting's background and subject's surroundings when working with genre scenes. What results in that case is a wider range of colors and a fuller composition when compared, for instance, to portraiture like 2008's "Man." The lone figure in that painting braces himself against the cold, facing away from the viewer in apparent reverie; he is all that occupies the small canvas. This sort of visual minimalism is typical of Byrd's hospital paintings, which he continued to create, from the vast halls of his memory, long after retirement.