



David Byrd  
*Sketchbook 3, p. 6, n.*  
d., pencil on paper  
11 × 14 in  
(27.9 × 35.6 cm),  
© David Byrd Estate.  
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David Byrd Estate  
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Gallery, New York

## David Byrd Drawings: Genre, Landscape, and Studies in Alienation

### In Resonance with David Byrd

November 18–January 15, 2021

Opening: Thursday November 18, noon–7pm

Fleisher/Ollman is pleased to present two exhibitions exploring the art of David Byrd: one of Byrd's drawings and the other featuring works that resonate and share affinities with the artist. David Byrd (b. 1926, Springfield, IL; d. 2013, Oxford, NY) worked in obscurity mainly in upstate New York and was active from the late 1940s until his death in 2013. His output was substantial and lifelong, but his first exhibition was not until the last year of his life. Byrd was a keen observer of the human condition and his rural environment, painting and drawing genre scenes and landscapes. His style channels the synthetic cubism of Amédée Ozenfant, with whom he briefly studied, by way of Magic Realism, a figurative yet fantastical current that paralleled the advent of Abstract Expressionism as Byrd came into his own as an artist in the 1950s. His strange and dejected drawings and paintings focus mainly on the community of Sidney Center, NY, where he lived during the last two decades of his life and where he was most productive. His subjects include auctioneers and attendees at country auctions, shoppers, street scenes, patrons in laundromats, and the occasional haunting composition based on fantasy. Most unsettling of all are Byrd's depictions of daily life in the psychiatric ward of the Veterans' Administration Medical Hospital, Montrose, NY, where Byrd was an orderly from 1958–1988.

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Byrd sometimes created drawings with an eye for their later realization as paintings, and in other instances, made them autonomously. Whether as preparatory studies or stand-alone works, the drawings showcase Byrd's trademark attention to detail through careful rendering with a simultaneous blurring in which bodies transform into fuzzy specters. With Byrd, there is a pronounced symbiosis between drawing and painting. The lightness of his graphite touch bestows on the scene a similar hazy, surreal effect that he achieves

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Press inquiries: Alex Baker [alex@fleisherollman.com](mailto:alex@fleisherollman.com) / Photo requests: Claire Ittis [claire@fleisherollman.com](mailto:claire@fleisherollman.com)

through his signature dry brush, thinned oil painting technique. Fleisher/Ollman also presents a group of much smaller sketches on what appears to be scrap paper that are more spontaneous and presumably made on shifts at the VA Hospital.

## In Resonance with David Byrd

Gertrude Abercrombie  
David Byrd  
Katelyn Eichwald  
Reggie Burrows Hodges  
Aubrey Levinthal  
John Joseph Mitchell  
Hughie Lee-Smith  
George Tooker  
John Wilde

The other exhibition on view, *In Resonance with David Byrd*, presents paintings and drawings by artists ranging from historical proponents of figurative modernism to living artists, all of whose work shares Byrdian sensibilities: an affinity for the forlorn, the belief in the profundity of the quotidian, the alienation of contemporary life, and an empathy for the marginalized. Gertrude Abercrombie (b. 1909, Austin, TX; d. 1977, Chicago, IL), Hughie Lee-Smith (b. 1915, Eustis, FL; d. 1999, Albuquerque, NM), George Tooker (b. 1920, Brooklyn, NY; d. 2011, Hartland, VT), and John Wilde (b. 1919, Milwaukee, WI; d. 2006, Evansville, WI), while disparate in their approaches to painting, like Byrd, went against the grain of an ascendant abstraction and chose instead representation and figuration to explore the uncertainties and anxieties in the United States during World War II, the Cold War, and the social upheaval of the 1960s. All are members of essentially the same artistic generation, born between 1909–1920. The contemporary artists featured in the exhibition, Katelyn Eichwald (b. Chicago, IL, 1987; lives and works Chicago), Reggie Burrows Hodges (b. 1965, Compton, CA; lives and works Lewiston, ME), Aubrey Levinthal (b. 1986, Philadelphia, PA; lives and works Philadelphia), and John Joseph Mitchell (b. 1989, Sommers Point, NJ; lives and works Tuckahoe, NJ) not only speak to Byrd in the aforementioned manner, but also bring into relief the collective sense of isolation and despair that many of us have experienced during the pandemic.

**Gertrude Abercrombie's** small, at once dark and jewel-like paintings range across barren landscapes, sparse interiors, self-portraits, and still lifes. Explorations in desolation and loneliness, her paintings teem with gothic melancholia with references to the supernatural and a personalized dream world. **George Tooker**, perhaps best known for his 1950 painting *The Subway*, a piercing meditation on 1950s conformity and alienation, also painted and drew more ambiguous pictures that nonetheless convey a sense of isolation, as well as a sensual, homoerotic longing. **Hughie Lee-Smith's** paintings feature blighted urban and industrial landscapes that have a dream-like quality. Whether populated by solitary figures or bleakly empty, a forlorn loneliness pervades his work. According to the artist, "In my case, aloneness, I think, has stemmed from the fact that I'm black. Unconsciously it has a lot to do with a sense of alienation." **John Wilde**, who was a close friend of Gertrude Abercrombie, created otherworldly paintings and drawings in a Northern Renaissance style. Wilde was drafted in World War II as an Army artist producing drawings for venereal disease manuals; the journals and drawings he made during his service charted his deepening depression but also served as a well of ideas for his future work—fantastical forays into his unconscious.

**Katelyn Eichwald** conjures mystery from the commonplace, presenting a group of small paintings that bring to mind painted storyboards for an imagined film noir. Her paintings engage in dialogue with one another between narrative scenes (a car beaming its headlights on a house at night) and closeups of objects like an ashtray or sink drain, suggesting an enigmatic *mise-en-scène*. **Reggie Burrows Hodges** either paints his canvases black or uses black paper grounds as the starting point to bring forth African-American subjects from the negative space of the picture plane. In one painting on paper included in the exhibition, black

forms blur into abstraction. Are they pilings along a waterfront or people walking in clusters? In either instance, a pensiveness permeates the image, confirming the title of the series from which the painting originates: *Isolation Tour*. Making works that obfuscate her world through washes and screens of paint, **Aubrey Levinthal**, like Eichwald, casts the everyday as disquieting. Her still lifes evoke haunting melancholia: a glass resting on a Tupperware container realized in gradations of blues and grays seems funereal, and a reflection of a face in a chrome toaster amidst bowls of fruit takes on the apparition of a ghost. **John Joseph Mitchell** paints from composited photographs, drawings, direct observation, and monotype studies. He focuses on his home environment, rural scenes of coastal southern New Jersey, and friends and family. Sharing a similar earthy palette to Byrd, if not the same technique, the mood of Mitchell's paintings can be somber, even if his chosen subjects are not inherently so.

David Byrd had two solo exhibitions during his lifetime, which were facilitated through a late friendship with Sidney Center artists Jody Isaacson and Jessica Farrell. In 2012 he had his first show at Maywood Arts, Sidney Center, NY, followed by a show in 2013 at Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, WA. Byrd passed away in 2013 at the age of 87. Recent solo exhibitions have occurred at venues including Anton Kern Gallery (2021 and 2019), *White Columns* (2019), *Fleisher/Ollman* (2018), and Greg Kucera Gallery (2017). In the summer and fall of 2017, the David Byrd Estate organized *Ten Stops*, a series of largely solo exhibitions of Byrd's work in upstate New York, Brooklyn, and Seattle. Other solo exhibitions have been presented at Catherine G. Murphy Gallery, St. Catherine University, St. Paul, MI (2015); Edgewood College Gallery, Madison, WI (2015); and Martin Mullen Gallery, SUNY-Oneonta, NY (2013). Byrd has shown in group exhibitions at Balice Hertling, Paris (2018–2019); Karma, Amagansett, NY (2016); and Zieher, Smith and Horton, New York, NY (2015).

*Special thanks to Jody Isaacson and Jessica Farrell of the David Byrd Estate, and Anton Kern Gallery, which represents the Estate.*