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ART & DESIGN

By Roberta Smith



David Byrd's "Hospital Hallways" (1992) in the exhibition "Montrose VA Hospital, 1958-1988." Credit...via The David Byrd Estate and Anton Kern Gallery, New York

The painter David Byrd was born in Springfield, Ill., in 1926. When he was quite young, his father, who had mental illness, left the family. When David was 12, his mother, unable to cope, ceded her six children to foster homes.

How this affected Byrd, who died in 2013, will never be known. But a trace of this trauma seems immanent in the tender paintings and colored-pencil drawings he made of life on the psychiatric ward of a Veterans Affairs hospital in Montrose, N.Y.

Byrd worked there as an orderly for three decades, having joined the merchant marine at 17; served in the U.S. Army during World War II; studied art for two years in New York with the Cubist Amédée Ozenfant and struggled to find a job that would allow him time to paint.

The hospital provided this, and subject matter, too. Byrd made tiny sketches during quiet times on the ward that became the basis for colored pencil drawings and the paintings. His surfaces are delicately textured and thin: The white paper or canvas glows through, to disembodied effect. Although Byrd also depicted life in Montrose, the hospital ward remained his primary focus, serving as a kind of never-ending figure-drawing class, where the unpredictable patients contrasted with the stripped-down geometry of institutional architecture.

This seems to be the case with "Hospital Hallways" (1992), the show's largest canvas. Here a long hallway intersecting with others create a recession of concentric wedges of pale yellow light and pink walls in which four patients can be seen; to the side, a doctor has just stepped into an elevator, cast in blue light.

Byrd worked for years on a scrapbook of drawings, accompanied by cryptic observations. Last year, the Anton Kern Gallery, with the artist's estate, published a striking facsimile of it, "Montrose VA, 1958-1988." The current gallery exhibition, which has the same name, shows Byrd methodically working up his haunting images and several pages from the scrapbook.

ROBERTA SMITH