

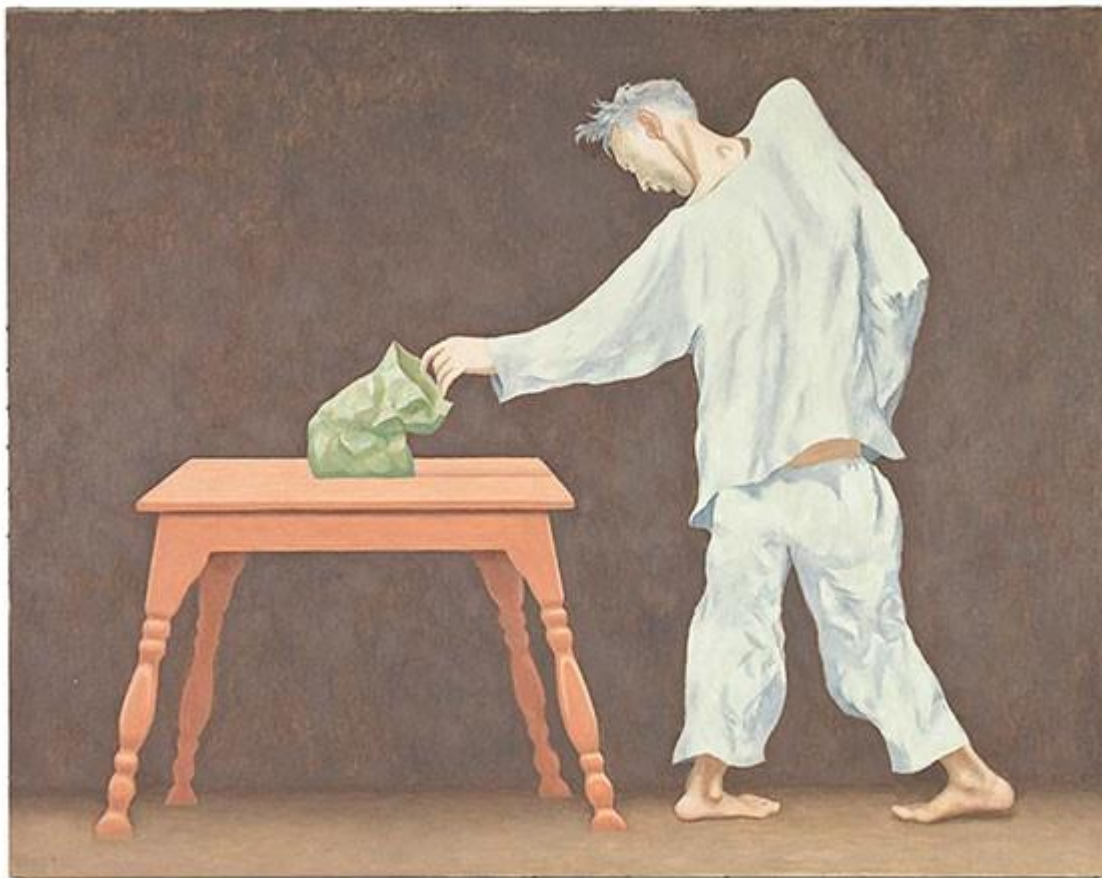
# the Stranger

[Visual Art Apr 3, 2013](#)

## A Vast Empathy

### One Man's Life's Work, Uncovered

by [Jen Graves](#)



David Byrd was an orderly on the psych ward for 30 years. Courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery



When Jody Isaacson moved to the sleepy New York town of Sidney Center, she was immediately curious about a driveway she kept passing. It teemed with old wheelbarrows, cinder blocks, machine parts, pieces of wood, lawn mowers, wheels—all placed just so. It looked like a junkyard arranged by an aesthete, and for three years, she only marveled at it. When she finally worked up the nerve to knock on the door one night this past September, she found herself face-to-face with a house just as full—but of paintings. There were so many that they were hung three to a single nail: small, medium, large, so that when she took one down, there was a smaller one nested underneath.

David Byrd, the house's resident hermit, made all of the paintings. Because of Isaacson's intervention, he is having his first-ever gallery exhibition at Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle, where Isaacson also shows. Byrd is 87. His first gallery solo comes 77 years after he attracted attention for his grade-school drawings, more than 60 years since his brief formal art studies with the Parisian cubist Amédée Ozenfant, and 25 years after his retirement from the humble occupation that provided his greatest artistic inspiration: being an orderly, for three decades, on the psychiatric ward at the Veterans Administration Medical Hospital in Montrose, New York—watching the aftershocks of World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam.

If Isaacson had not knocked...

"I thought an auctioneer would find my paintings after I was gone and sell them off—I just thought it would go that way," Byrd said by phone from an emergency-room waiting area in upstate New York last week, where Isaacson took him after he fell ill. His planned trip to Seattle was hanging in the balance. It was to be his first plane ride, traveling to be reunited with the almost 100 paintings, drawings, and sculptures that had already been shipped to the gallery.

"We've never done a show quite like this," says Greg Kucera, pulling painting after plastic-wrapped painting from their boxes and leaning them against the wall.

Like Byrd's driveway and house, his paintings are full—of scenery, of history, of people, of difficult subjects like suffering and suicide—but polished. Stylish. Calm.

Each painting takes months to finish, and Byrd works on only one at a time. They're made from memory, using sketches on paper, but he never draws directly on the canvas, only paints (with oil). His brushstrokes are workmanlike; there's "no glory in the brush," as Kucera remarks, and he uses so little paint, it looks like he's rationing. The surfaces are parched and raw, seen unframed, not under glass. Their palette is subdued and gray-toned, highlighted in perfectly heartbreaking pastels of peach, blue, pink, green, yellow. Byrd's obvious influences—he is not an outsider artist—are pointillism, surrealism, social realism, and 1930s American regionalism, and in some senses what he makes is frozen in time from back when he studied art, before his day job and his hermitry. But he is also idiosyncratic and strange, and sometimes more simpatico with fringe artists, whether Ozenfant or De Chirico or Balthus. Byrd is enough *himself* that he is a real discovery, both of a "new" artist and of a remarkably fully formed and prolific career.

His visions of the VA hospital contain a vast empathy under the visual austerity. His patients—he retired in 1988, but his mind and art clearly still live there—are rendered simply, outlined and shaded neatly, and their bent and rounded bodies communicate as much as their lined faces (in a style reminiscent of Jacob Lawrence's individual-but-members-of-a-group figuration). They hurt. Their limbs sometimes shoot straight up in the air even while they sleep. One man compulsively lathers himself into a sudsy monster in the group showers, a cartoon containing a grain of horror and a grain of affection. The only symmetrical painting shows a lobotomized woman, a hollowed-out angel in a green gown who has been reduced to a tidy assembly of shapes. Byrd renders another lost soul as a frantic blur of Francis Bacon proportions.

Still other paintings are brilliant period pieces, cleverly composed narratives: a billboard seen through a tunnel like a Gatsby-era revelation; a salesman's miniature sample casket being auctioned; a pregnant woman making up a bed where, in a heap of cumulonimbus sheets and pillows beneath a kitschy painting of Jesus in moonlight, a revolver rests ominously.

The hospital paintings feel out of time in the way that mental illness has that aching feeling of being timeless, hopeless, helpless. By contrast, paintings based in Byrd's childhood experience in bad foster homes are nightmares. He depicts floating figures, sometimes appearing to be naked from the waist down, in varying, disorienting sizes. There is some indication, from a video made by Andrea Hull, that Byrd's father was himself institutionalized, lending extra poignancy to Byrd's job, and his art. ★