

[Tom Tangney](#)

Man in a Garbage Can



"Man in a Garbage Can" from the Greg Kucera Gallery

It's relatively rare for an established Seattle art gallery to host a painter's first-ever commercial exhibition. But it's almost unheard of for an unknown artist to break into the art world at the age David Byrd finds himself to be.

David Byrd, from upstate New York, is making his gallery debut at the startling age of 87.

One hundred of his works, mostly oil paintings but also drawings and wood sculptures, are now on display at Seattle's famed Greg Kucera Gallery. And the subjects of his work are as varied as his life has been.

Born in 1926, he was raised in three different foster homes, travelled to both Europe and Asia as a merchant marine during the 40's, attended art school on the G.I. Bill, and then settled into a life as an orderly in the psychiatric ward of a veteran's hospital. Since his retirement in the late 80's, he's mostly lived a hermit's life in a house he built with his own hands.

Not surprisingly, many of his paintings reflect his 30-year career on the psych ward with apt titles like "Catatonic," "Lobotomy," and "Hostile Patient." Despite their often downbeat titles and troubled subject matter, the paintings themselves are remarkably placid and subdued, full of pastel colors and structural balance. It's as if Byrd adopted Wordsworth's definition of poetry for his own paintings – "emotion recollected in tranquility."

In his 1996 painting "Suicide," a perfectly composed man is caught in mid-flight with his arms fully extended and his mouth wide open ... as if executing the perfect swan dive. Is that a smile on his face or a grimace?

In the 1986 painting "Sack on Table," Byrd positions a crumpled pale green paper bag on a table next to an equally angular mental patient in crumpled hospital clothing. As he reaches for a look inside the bag, it's as if he's taking a peek at himself.

Another favorite of mine – no doubt for personal reasons, me being a movie critic – is "Chapter Four," which depicts a movie theatre exterior. A passive female ticket seller is on the right, a begoggled boy on the left, and a giant serial Fu Manchu movie poster announcing "The Teeter-Totter of Death" in between. (Since his mother once worked in a box office, a biographical analysis might suggest this is a mother and son balancing the teeter-totter of life.)

The David Byrd exhibition at the Greg Kucera Gallery near Seattle's Pioneer Square runs through May 18, 2013.