

At 87, Artist David Byrd Is Just Getting Started

With a lifetime of work to show, the New York painter and sculptor makes his gallery debut this week at Greg Kucera.

By [Laura Dannen](#) 4/2/2013 at 10:11am



David Byrd, *Sack on the Table*, 1986, oil on canvas, 33 x 42 in.

Image: [Courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery](#)

David Byrd has a biography that reads like a Hollywood screenplay: Raised in three foster homes. Shipped to Europe and Asia as a merchant marine from 1943 to 1945. Attended art school on the G.I. Bill, but worked most of his life as an orderly in the psych ward of a veteran's hospital in New York. Retired to upstate New York and lived in a shack for *four years* as he built his own home. **Through it all, he sketched and painted, amassing some 400 artworks that—until now—were a life's story untold.**

Byrd's work may have gone undiscovered if not for his neighbor and fellow artist, Jody Isaacson, who put the 87-year-old in touch with her representation, Seattle gallerist Greg Kucera. Now, for the first time, Byrd will lead outsiders down the *Hospital Hallway*, where life is fragile and stability seems to fade like the color from his palette. Roughly 100 works will be on display in Seattle—oil paintings, drawings, and wood sculptures—and the artist will make the long trip across country for the opening this Thursday.

Before his arrival, Byrd chatted with us from his home in upstate New York, allowing us to unravel the stories behind some of his paintings.



David Byrd, *Chapter Four*, 1994, oil on canvas, 33 x 42 in.

Image: [Courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery](#)

***Chapter Four*, 1994**

“I worked as an usher at one of those movie houses for a couple of months. You get tired of looking at the movie onscreen, so after four or five times watching it, you begin to look around for something more interesting. This was the result. I was about 19, 20 when I was an usher. I was in art school and some of those jobs were short lived. On the G. I. Bill, the tuition paid for schooling and they give you \$75 a month, I think, for living, which wasn’t enough. You took any little job you could get. I was also a bus boy.”



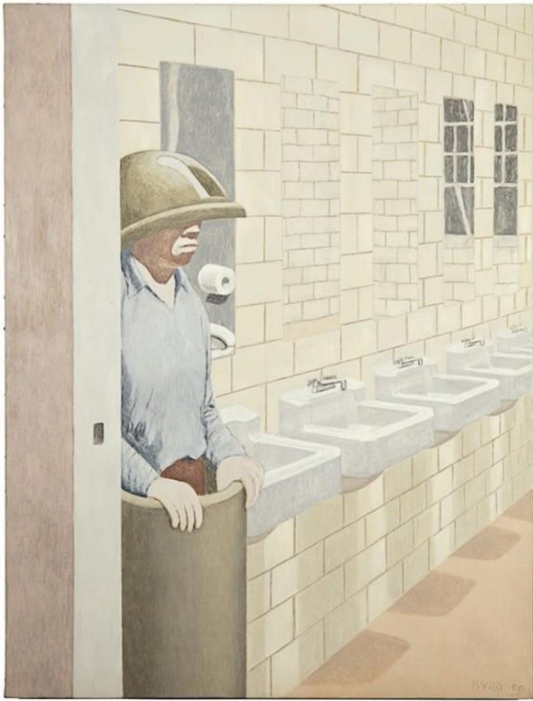
David Byrd, *Hospital Hallway*, 1992, oil on canvas, 43 x 52 in.

Image: [Courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery](#)

***Hospital Hallway*, 1992**

“I worked at the veteran’s hospital from about 1956 to ’86, about 30 years. I remember the man facing the wall. There were other patients in the hallway. One was hearing voices. People would ask me about the one facing

the wall, talking to the wall. I would say, He's bedded, he's fed, he's medicated, but he's not cured. That's the story of the building I was in."



David Byrd, *Man in Garbage Can*, 2000, oil on canvas, 34 x 26 in.

Image: [Courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery](#)

"You were kept busy but it was a boring job. The day-to-day was taking the patient count, and making sure everybody was there who was supposed to be there. There was meal time—I usually worked on the union shift—and there were suppertime duties you had to observe. And then there was the television that was always on. There was nothing much to do after bedtime. Once in a while you'd have to get some of the patients to the bathroom, because they'd otherwise wet the bed. It was the same thing, day after day after day, year after year after year."

"You had to be careful. Sometimes there was a new patient you had to get acquainted with, learn about. A patient could be dangerous or unpredictable. And so it went. I wondered if painting kept me from going crazy. I'm trying to figure out why I painted them. They were good subject matter and I think any artist would get something from that, as people *are*."



David Byrd, *Shack in the Catskills*, 1986, oil on canvas, 21 x 27 in.

Image: [Courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery](#)

***Shack in the Catskills*, 1986**

“After retirement, I moved up here to the southern Binghamton area and bought some property that was available for anybody who had a little money. I built a house on it. That shack was where I lived for about four years when I was doing stonework on the foundation of the house. ... [The cabin] was barely livable, but I guess for hunters it was a good kind of thing. It’s gone now. I was happy to see it go. I live in the same house now. The winters up here are rough, so I have some cabin fever I don’t enjoy too much.”

LD: Are you looking forward to your trip to Seattle?

I am. It’ll be nice to see the paintings again. I haven’t seen them for a while. I had too many pictures around here though and I’m glad to see some of them go. But I’ll miss them. It’s a mixed up kind of thing.

LD: Do they feel personal?

I try to depersonalize them. The good ones are in there. The indifferent ones are there, and the ones that need more work are there. He’s got a lot of selling to do. I hope he sells them all—most of them, anyhow.

David Byrd – Introduction: A Life of Observation

Apr 4–May 18, Greg Kucera Gallery