

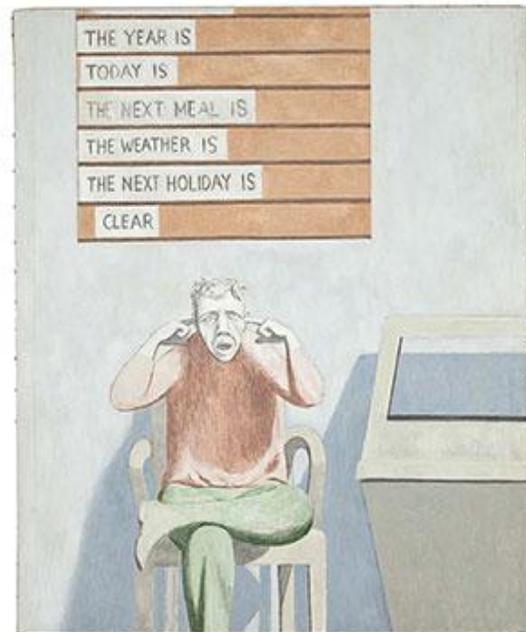
In “Introduction: A Life of Observation” at Greg Kucera Gallery, the artist David Byrd, once an avid collector and trader of antique bottles, offers up to viewers his own vessels of nostalgia in the form of nearly one hundred oil paintings, works on paper, and wooden sculptures. Like a shelf of Byrd’s glass relics, the show is a menagerie of personal histories, a life of looking spread across four rooms. Echoing the chromatic idiom of aged Americana, the show’s palette is all rust and patina and light-bleached wood. But his haunting portraits and eerie landscapes offer more than the voyeuristic viewing of a dusty antique store. The purposeful act of recollection comes through here as well, that complicated give and take between reality and imagination that resides in the creative architecture of any given memory. Moving through the show, what we are led to observe, then, is not what Byrd has seen, but what he has remembered.



*Filing Station at Night (1997), Oil on canvas*

Although there are works on view from as early as the 1950s, Byrd did not devote himself to his art full-time until 1988, when he retired to Sidney Center, New York at the age of 62. Working decades after he had last seen his subjects and without the help of photographic aids, he drew upon those visual archives at his disposal: his prolific sketchbooks and his memory. Framed as a representational sample of his oeuvre, Byrd’s paintings, which make up the bulk of the show, are organized here into three thematic groupings: VA hospital (scenes from the artist’s thirty-year career as an orderly in a veteran’s psychiatric ward), landscapes, and genre scenes. The show, Byrd’s first, takes its title from the artist’s professed conviction that “painting is all about observation and experience,” a framework he both champions and deconstructs.

A kaleidoscopic archive of autobiographical snapshots, the show asks of its viewers: what are the people, places, and events that make up a life? What sort of information does a recollection hold? In Byrd’s case, he favors the familiar architecture of daily life—panoramas from his commute, intimate workplace



*Patient Hearing Voices (1975), Oil on canvas*

vignettes— as well as scenes organized around the expression of a particular kind of self-contained melancholy. It is through these mournful portraits, mostly of his patients with a handful from his painful childhood, that Byrd explores and exposes the perceptual limits of remembered observation. As if each painting were one of his patients, Byrd does his best to faithfully reconstruct a scene's symptoms, even if he has forgotten (or perhaps never knew in the first place) its underlying cause.



*Man in Bed* (1973), Oil on canvas

A conscious, constructive act of remembering is particularly striking in the large number of VA hospital paintings in view. Familiar visuals of an institutionalized life are all here: Byrd shows us medicine rations, stony-faced nurses, glowing television sets, and patients in the throes of unsettling outbursts. In *Man in Bed* (1972), the viewer looks down on a patient nearly subsumed by his bed linens, his sharply contorted limb betraying a night of restless repose. The outline of a strained body underneath the sheets once caught Byrd's eye and now demands our attention, while the specifics of the man and his surroundings have dropped away.

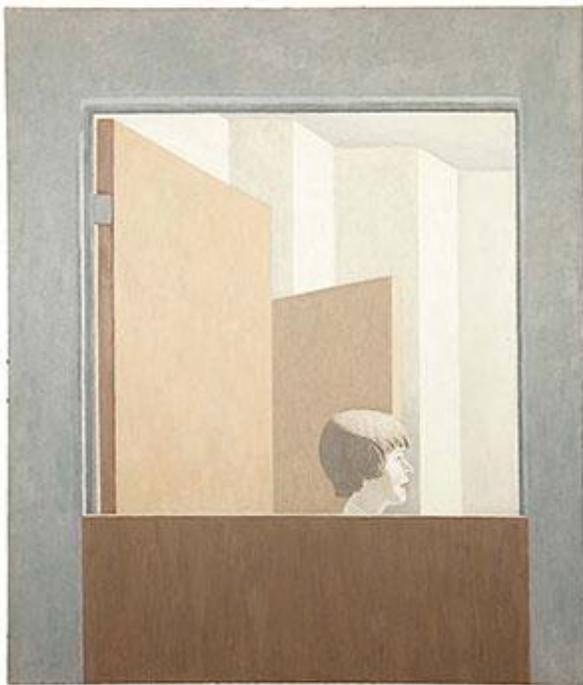
This interplay between observation and memory, where both Byrd and the viewer oscillate between the remembered past and working present, is reinforced through the artist's stylistic choices. Most of the scenes are closely cropped and oddly foreshortened, observations projected onto the cramped screen of the mind's eye. An attention to architecture is paramount across Byrd's VA hospital, landscape, and genre scenes. By the end of the show one is seduced by the works' visual coherence – it is tempting to identify a recognizable painterly style in the vein of Charles Sheeler or Alex Katz. Yet rather than fall into the trap of predictability, Byrd's artistic fidelity instead bolsters the show's confrontation with issues of



*Patients Watching Television* (1992), Oil on canvas

memory and observation, reinforcing the idea that these works are the remembered contents of his life and his life only, artistic antiques now brought out for display.

David Byrd's debut show is not only an introduction to this intriguing and complicated work, but an invitation for viewers to ask questions of their own life. At the heart of this work lies a universal impulse, one that seeks to explain not *what*, but *how* we remember. If we look closely enough, beneath the flattened surface of each composition the creative architecture of a given memory is revealed to us. Whether it is the deserted movie theatre of *Balcony With Screen* (1948) or the fluorescent cave of *½ Door*'s (1985) nurses' station, Byrd has created with layers of paint what we all do with words and thoughts.



*½ Door* (1985), Oil on canvas



*Balcony With Screen* (1955), Oil on canvas

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