

ARTFORUM

David Byrd

ANTON KERN GALLERY AND WHITE COLUMNS

For most of his life, the painter David Byrd (1926–2013) was known not as an artist but as a hospital orderly. After serving in World War II, he worked odd jobs before settling in at the Veterans Administration facility in Montrose, New York, laboring there for thirty years before retiring to paint full-time in 1988. In 2012, Byrd's art was discovered by a neighbor. He was eighty-six years old and had only a year left to live. A 2013 exhibition at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle was the first step in the familiar choreography for a so-called outsider artist striding to prominence. Byrd was able to attend the opening before dying of lung cancer in May of that year. His reputation has only grown since.

This winter, Byrd had two shows in major New York venues: one at Anton Kern Gallery, which featured landscapes, portraits, and hard-to-classify hybrids of the two, and the other at White Columns, which focused on his disturbed dispatches from the VA's psychiatric ward. Byrd was not an outsider artist in the sense of being self-taught (he studied with the Cubist painter Amédée Ozenfant in New York), but he was always reclusive, his style unlike anything happening in a white cube. His images are a paradoxical mix of placidity and existential struggle, like a rogue Giacometti sketching ads for big pharma. It's hard to read his subjects, in part because they're often faceless: ghostly, half recalled, half dreamt, all fearsome. He favored a bleached palette of earth-tone oils—the colorways of institutionally enforced calm, as if he'd distilled the essence of a thousand waiting rooms. (After thirty years at the hospital, he couldn't escape these sickly hues.)

The pictures from the VA, which make up the bulk of his output, are mainly of people on drugs, though not the fun kind. As Byrd noted in a sketchbook, "Therapy was mostly tranquilizers; pills." Sometimes his subjects tussle with the tangible, as in *Man Unbuttoning His Cuff*, 1986, or *Putting On Top*, 1960, paintings of people struggling with their clothes, or *Angry Man*, 2011, in which a crowded corridor frames a fleeing figure running headlong into a wall (or, possibly, a void). Usually, though, the distressing forces are unseen. In *The Cave*, 1973, five misshapen bodies hover against a cavernous, gloomy backdrop—three of them are perhaps dancing, or maybe just feeling woozy. You can almost hear the patients' Thorazine shuffle.

The Cave's wobbly vibe is typical, in part because Byrd usually worked from memory, sometimes years after the fact. His recollections seem inescapable, as Byrd compulsively returned to his visions of the VA for decades. At White Columns, *Angry Man* shared a wall with *Given Meds*, 1992; *Hands in the Pants*, 1970; and *Putting On Top*—representing more than four decades of medicalized subjects, none of them happy, some shading into Francis Bacon-like levels of inner torment. Byrd was clearly troubled by what he saw at work, but, like any gifted noticer, he also appreciated the dark drama of minds in extremis. Next to a sketchbook drawing of a man standing in a trash can, Byrd

David Byrd, *Auctioneer*, 1970, oil on canvas, 34 x 28". White Columns.



wrote, "When a person thinks he is garbage it is pathetic but depending on the person he can be hostile also. What is he going to do next? . . . Broadway plays are made of such stuff. Absurdist kind."

—David O'Neill