

# GLADSTONE

Piper Marshall, "Ed Atkins," *Artforum*, October 2025.

## ARTFORUM

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Clockwise, from left: View of "Ed Atkins," 2025, Tate Britain, London. Background and foreground: *Masses*, 2018. Center: *Good Man*, 2017. Ed Atkins, *Hisser*, 2015, three-channel HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes. Installation view. Photo: Mark Blower. Ed Atkins and Steven Zultanski, *Nurses Come and Go, But None for Me*, 2024, HD video, color, sound, 121 minutes.

### Ed Atkins

TATE BRITAIN, LONDON

CURATED BY POLLY STAPLE

Piper Marshall

**YOU WANT TO FEEL?** I do. Ed Atkins crafts his work from this fundamental human longing: a desire sparked when we leaned into screens and became aware of a rehearsed reality just out of reach. As his midcareer survey at Tate Britain, curated by Polly Staple, demonstrates, the artist's ache (and ours, too), pains and humbles, numbs and shocks; it registers through a heightened feeling of loss. His overarching allegorical project contrives encounters between digital reality and the physical world, between the dead and the still living, often rearranging, uncannily, the borders between the two. The hybrid results of these collisions have taken wildly differing formats, from room-filling racks of theater costumes to canned digital tropes; from the Post-it drawings scrawled for his daughter to the death diary penned by his father. The displays are alternately entrancing and estranging, mournful and melancholic, placing the artist's touching souvenirs in tension with an untouchable mess of digital desire.

From the outset of his career, Atkins's work has hinged on the relationship between the ready-made and the raw response. Made at the cusp of the aughts,

the earliest works on view are primarily editing experiments. Inducing in viewers the same titillation as the horror genre, the video *Death Mask II: The Scent*, 2010, presents a sequence of vacantly evocative stock images—a clock, a calculator, a candle flame, a durian fruit—in sickly filtered close-ups. Over the course of the eight-minute short, these stills rotate and brighten, dim and multiply. Atkins swipes the soundtrack from Ruggero Deodato's cult film *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), strategically alternating the catchy audio with his janky soundtrack of human coughing and clicking, chattering and strumming.

When a performer laughs out loud or comments on their own actions onstage, they rupture the continuity of the narrative, known as "corpsing" the scenario. With an edgelord's satisfaction, Atkins adopts this strategy in *Hisser*, 2015, one of his first works to be fully rendered in CGI. Developed from a news item about a Florida man swallowed by a sinkhole beneath his home, the resulting video features a downcast digital double splayed over three screens of increasing size. The aged avatar is stuck in bed. His limbs bob as the lens dilates and constricts. First we surveil him. The video cuts to black. Now we occupy his point of view. Through this absurd kind of necromancy, we identify and then embody the role of reanimated cadaver. Atkins gives us a way to languish as the undead; suddenly we hear an amplified voice (the artist's) rejoin, "I did not know her life was so sad."

Installed adjacent to *Hisser* is a picture window offering a view onto the work *Beds*, 2025, a pair of bed frames that breathe like twin bodies, fluttering their vacated sheets. The stage set is powered by a motor first used in Atkins's 2022 play *Sorcerer*, an entwining of the automated and appropriated that also recurs throughout the next section of the exhibition, devoted to the series "Old Food," 2017–19. For the installation *Masses*, 2018, Atkins employs a threadbare wardrobe on loan from Berlin's Deutsche Oper, packing the gallery

with floor-to-ceiling clothing racks lined with medieval costumes. Placed amid the many rails of cloth are flat screens that feature the emotive mugs of CGI stock figures in period attire. These generic faces yawn and weep, among them *Good Boy*, *Good Man*, and *Good Baby*, all 2017. Though seemingly opposite, the weightless avatars and the worn outfits are doubles: Atkins gives us a good look at the theatrics—the pained affect that the game designer programs, or the hanging garb that the ensemble takes on and off—that are used to mediate cultural codes of tribulation.

When Atkins sheds his digital ciphers, his work marvelously takes on new life, most poignantly with the exhibition's final work, *Nurses Come and Go, But None for Me*, 2024, his first feature-length film, made with poet Steven Zultanski. On-screen, before an audience of adolescents, actor Toby Jones reads from "Sick Notes," an account of terminal illness written by Atkins's ailing father, Philip, in the months before his 2009 death from cancer. At the midway point, Jones sputters. "AAHOH SORRY. . . THIS WILL HURT A BIT MMMMGHAAA I'LL JUST DAB THIS. . . Shit shit shit SHIT SHIT OH NO SHIT SHIT." The disjointed words prime us for an ensuing metaphysical jolt. But Jones softens. He whispers, "How and when does one begin to think about dying?" He folds his glasses, unlaces his shoes, and lies down. He stills. Actor Saskia Reeves, who plays a first responder, suddenly alters the story with "The Ambulance Game," a game invented by Atkins and his young daughter. We see Reeves perform the way a child might, thrumming around as an emergency vehicle, a doctor, and an attentive nurse. She carefully cradles Jones's limbs. Her hands-on connection reminds us that human touch is the tonic for a grave prognosis. You want to feel. Me too. □

PIPER MARSHALL RECENTLY EARNED A DOCTORATE FROM COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY FOR A PROJECT THEORIZING ARTISTIC PRACTICES THAT SUBVERT THE ORTHODOXIES OF THE AVANT-GARDE.

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