

# ARTnews

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## David Bates

DC MOORE

David Bates has long harbored a vital ambition: to find an American vernacular voice within the greater tradition of Western painting. In that pursuit he has sought to meld the untutored genuineness of folk art with the calculated primitivism of 20th-century masters such as Picasso, Matisse, and Rouault. It is an alliance found also in the late work of Marsden Hartley, whose bold images seem to be the starting point for Bates's own paintings. At his best, Bates succeeds. His bold outlines, simplified detail, and strong color all speak of an atavism that defines a very particular raw American directness.



David Bates, *Woman with Red Check Pants*, 2001, oil on panel, 72" x 48".  
DC Moore.

The strongest paintings in this show, *Woman With Red Check Pants* and *Irides*, display Bates's authoritative touch. In these he juxtaposes values and colors, finesse and crudeness, with perfect pitch. But each of the paintings is also indebted to prior masters, in this case Matisse, circa 1916, and Max Beckmann, respectively. In his earlier paintings, Bates's debts to his mentors do not seem quite so transparent, and his devotion to subjects closely allied to the American scene feels more immediate.

Bates is now a refined and accomplished painter, which makes his roughness sometimes look mannered, as when he appropriates the tattered remnants and crudely sawn wood typical of folk art in his large wood-and-paint constructions.

This group of paintings and constructions, with only a few exceptions, was devoted to still life, a subject with deep roots, both stylistically and iconographically, in European painting. Finding a contemporary American voice in this genre may take more than the vigorous brushstroke that Bates has used to such advantage until now.

—Kit White