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David Bates

D. C. Moore
724 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street
Through Dec. 22

In fashionable art-world circles the paintings of David Bates are considered conservative if not reactionary or, at best, guilty pleasures, if they are considered at all. If I wanted to signal my agreement I would say that I like them against my better judgment, but in truth I just like them.

Mr. Bates, who was born and lives in Dallas, is working with energy in a still-life tradition that dates to Manet, late Braque and Marsden Hartley. His paintings of flowers and fruit don't sit quietly on the wall. They bristle like carpentered objects, press forward with every molecule and demand attention. Their ancestral DNA might even include Joe Zucker's obstreperous cottonball paintings. Mr. Bates's bayou swampscapes are marginally more contained, but are full of lurid lights and depictions of actual carpentry in the form of boats and cabins; they peacefully intimate nature's demise. But the artist's aggressive intentions are perhaps clearest in his individual and group portraits of angry residents of the Gulf Coast who got the short end of the stick when Hurricane Katrina passed through. Taken from television, these images bring the self-contained glower that hovers behind his work out into the open and give it the immediate force of human emotions and events. These works suggest that even in times of crisis, paintings can be as powerful as photographs.

ROBERTA SMITH