

# Star-Telegram

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## Retrospective of Texas artist David Bates opens at the Modern in Fort Worth and the Nasher in Dallas

By Gaile Robinson

When David Bates graduated from Southern Methodist University in the mid-1970s, he was plucked from the hinterlands and whisked to New York City for inclusion in the highly regarded Independent Study Program sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art. It was a passport to New York's inner art circles, and Bates was one of the few considered worthy of the honor.

Only one tiny problem; he didn't fit in. It was a time of minimalism, video experimentation and conceptual installations, and Bates was not interested in any of that. He wanted to paint.

Struggling, Bates finally abandoned the big bright lights for low-wattage anonymity in Dallas. He traded a fame that could have been either fleeting or longstanding for a steady career and relegated himself to being an artist of regional stature. The New York art swirl does not encompass those beyond the outer boroughs, and Bates understood the sacrifice.

"Regionalism is a nasty comment," Bates says. "It makes art seem small-minded. There is no difference between what I do or what Marsden Hartley or [Richard] Diebenkorn did. What I do couldn't be more American. You can look at German art as regional, Chinese art as regional, but it's all art. Sometimes you want Mexican food, other times Italian. And every once in a while you want some grits and barbecue."

His gritty efforts have not gone unnoticed in the land of chowders, and his work is in national museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, as well as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and numerous private collections. The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth has 12 of his works in its permanent collection. He is one of the most successful local artists, perhaps the most successful.

A retrospective of Bates' work opens Sunday, Feb. 9, at two area museums. His paintings are at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and his sculptures, 3-D works and drawings are at the Nasher Sculpture Center. The exhibition "David Bates" is so large — more than 90 works — that no single museum can handle the show, so it won't be traveling. New York will miss out on Bates again.

It's a shame because the Texas artist's work is exceptional and defies classification; it is neither abstract nor realistic. It is rough, raw and unapologetic in its use of humble materials that often depict man and beast in primordial settings, in struggles and labors that border on the biblical.

The body of work that brought Bates to national attention in the 1980s is a group of paintings from Grassy Lake, a swampy fishing area in western Arkansas that captured his imagination and paintbrush for almost a decade. The chronological starting point for this exhibition, the large paintings of birds, snakes, alligators and men, often feeding on each other, are stunningly powerful. Bates doesn't separate the people from the wildlife or the setting; none is more heroic than the others. In the exhibition catalog, he explains, "In my mind, the whole lake and the things and people that live in and around it are one big portrait."

It was these paintings that attracted Marla Price, then chief curator at the Modern, who gave him a solo show there in 1989. It was her first effort for the museum. Now, she sits in the director's office, but for Bates' return, she reverted to her old curator form and organized this exhibit with Jeremy Strick, director of the Nasher, in what is the first joint effort between the two institutions.

"David could have continued to paint those Grassy Lake paintings the rest of his life, and rested there," Price says, "But as long as I have known him, he is always challenging himself."

Bates moved from the swamps of Grassy Lake to the Texas Gulf Coast, where the air opened but the paint got thicker. He began painting Hemingway-esque scenes of men grappling with their catches, usually as thunderclouds loomed. The location could be anywhere in the world. He tries to keep any telltale elements of time out of these scenes; he wants them to have a universality and timelessness. Only his painting style gives them away. His heavy black outlines and two-dimensional planes of color are from this time.

As Bates tried to get more depth in his paintings, he began affixing boards and chunks of cardboard and metal to his canvases and painting those to get a 3-D effect that he couldn't achieve with paint. It was suggested that he try sculpting, so he booked himself into a foundry in Walla Walla, Wash., and began cobbling together portraits with pieces of lumber and cardboard. The results were fairly flimsy and would not have survived the trip back to Texas, so they were cast in bronze and Bates painted over the metal, creating the look of the original wood chunks. The sculptures look exactly like his paintings. They could come from no other hand.

This began a long stretch of bouncing between the two mediums — first sculpting, then painting, and often the same subject. As he got bolder with his sculptural materials, he began incorporating machine parts, odd chunks of John Deere farm machinery, rusted pieces of iron and ragged sheets of copper. In addition, table legs, fence pickets, drawer fronts, wooden salad bowls, place mats, the brim of a straw hat, fabric, and unusual pieces of tree bark were all scavenged to make his sculptures.

Bates would use anything that could be burned out of the mold, which in turn would be filled with molten bronze and then painted to look like the original material.

“I love the materials,” he says. “When I start paintings, it is the square of white, but with sculpture, you have this inherent beauty of those materials. I didn’t want it to be so precious that you wouldn’t paint on it.”

Reading the gallery signage is to doubt the credibility of the registrar. Bronze? Really? It looks like wood. It is almost impossible to tell which is a cast piece and which is cardboard or wood. Bates says museum visitors often give his sculptures surreptitious thumps, listening for the dull thump of wood and instead hearing the ringing sound of bronze.

One gallery of the Nasher is filled with Bates’ painted sculptures. They are quite lively. He says that years ago he had a conversation with Ray Nasher, founder of the sculpture center, who asked him why he painted the bronze pieces. Bates replied that he had to paint them because he was a painter. Nasher just shook his head. The conversation fizzled to an end with neither man willing to concede.

Bates did quit painting his cast pieces, but only occasionally, and now there is an unpainted Bates bronze in the Nasher collection. The Barrett family of Dallas, a longtime collector of Bates’ work, presented *Man With Snake II* to the Nasher and gave an equally dramatic painting, *The Cleaning Table*, to the Modern.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and it spurred Bates’ next great body of paintings, the “Katrina” series. Only five are in the exhibition at the Modern, but they are monumentally tragic. Bates painted them from memories of the media coverage and stories he heard.

“I’d been going down there a lot for the last 25 years and it was probably December before I got there,” he recalls. “In art, the great mainstays of painting are portraits, landscapes, still lifes and history paintings. I’d never felt the urge of history painting, but this was history painting to me. I felt like a reporter. I felt like I needed to report on the situation. I also felt bad that I wasn’t there. There weren’t a lot of artists reporting on the topic and I didn’t really know to what purpose I was doing it, but I was compelled. I needed to do that.”

The haunted eyes of his subjects are not easily forgotten. These paintings stay with you long after you have left the museum.

Regular sightings of Bates’ work continue in the area. He has regular shows at the Talley Dunn Gallery in Dallas, and each year when the Dallas Art Fair opens its doors, Bates’ pieces are on display. Galleries from distant cities that come for the fair will hang his work, so we know that they know who counts.

No matter how familiar you are with his work, you probably haven’t seen it like this. It is a profound retrospective. Seeing his self-portraits and magnolias — themes he paints once a year,

as mile markers of his evolution — and seeing the wonderful “Grassy Lake” and “Katrina” series together are treats not likely to happen again. Those are the highlights at the Modern.

At the Nasher, there are the painted sculptures that you would swear are wood, the cardboard boxes broken and carved into rough skulls before being cast and the huge relief paintings that really are more like sculptures. This wonderful assemblage illustrates the artist’s process, how he moves from drawing to sculpture, then on to painting. Here are the gears of his fertile imagination so the visitor can witness a circular creativity that is wonderful to behold.