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David Bates, *The Deluge IV*, 2007.

## Capturing the Recurring Moments of Horror of Hurricane Katrina

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art  
4420 Warwick Boulevard  
816-753-0394  
Kansas City  
*Angry Eyes*  
*David Bates: The Katrina Paintings*  
May 21-August 22, 2010

By BLAIR SCHULMAN

The subjects in David Bates post-Hurricane Katrina paintings simmer with anger, shock and weariness.

Watching the moving images of tragedy on television, it's easy to consume a sound bite and move on. From a historic standpoint, Bates captures singular moments long after the cameras have moved on.

Based in Texas, Bates has a long kinship with New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. He spent many years there fishing and painting the local citizenry, so these paintings are both homage and a matter of public record. Like the rest of the world, the artist saw live devastation and began

sketching images from the fifth worst hurricane in American history, which occurred in August, 2005.

The faces throughout this exhibition give off a "thousand-yard stare," a term used for soldiers returning from the front. Everyone depicted in Bates' work seems limp and battle-weary.

In the series *Katrina Portraits III, IV, V, VI, and VII* (2006-07 watercolor and charcoal on paper) which appear to be a studies for future paintings, Bates' images are haunting. The only colors used are gold, black and a dirty white. The sepia-toned ghostliness of these pieces captures a visceral rage that asks, "Do you see us? We were here. Where were you?"

The Large-scale triptych, *The Storm* (2006, oil on canvas) shows the rugged and weathered appearance of storm victims looking back at us. Their looks make it quite clear this is a group shot no one wanted any part. In the sea of heat-beaten faces this cacophony of agony is compelling. Conversely, there is a show of strength in these subjects that is reminiscent of *Agora*, the massive iron pieces by sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz displayed in Chicago's Grant Park. Each stands erect and strong, regardless of the circumstances. The undercurrent of anger in this crowd is obvious and might best be said in a line from an old Kenny Loggins song, "What a shot you could be, if you could shoot at me with those angry eyes..."

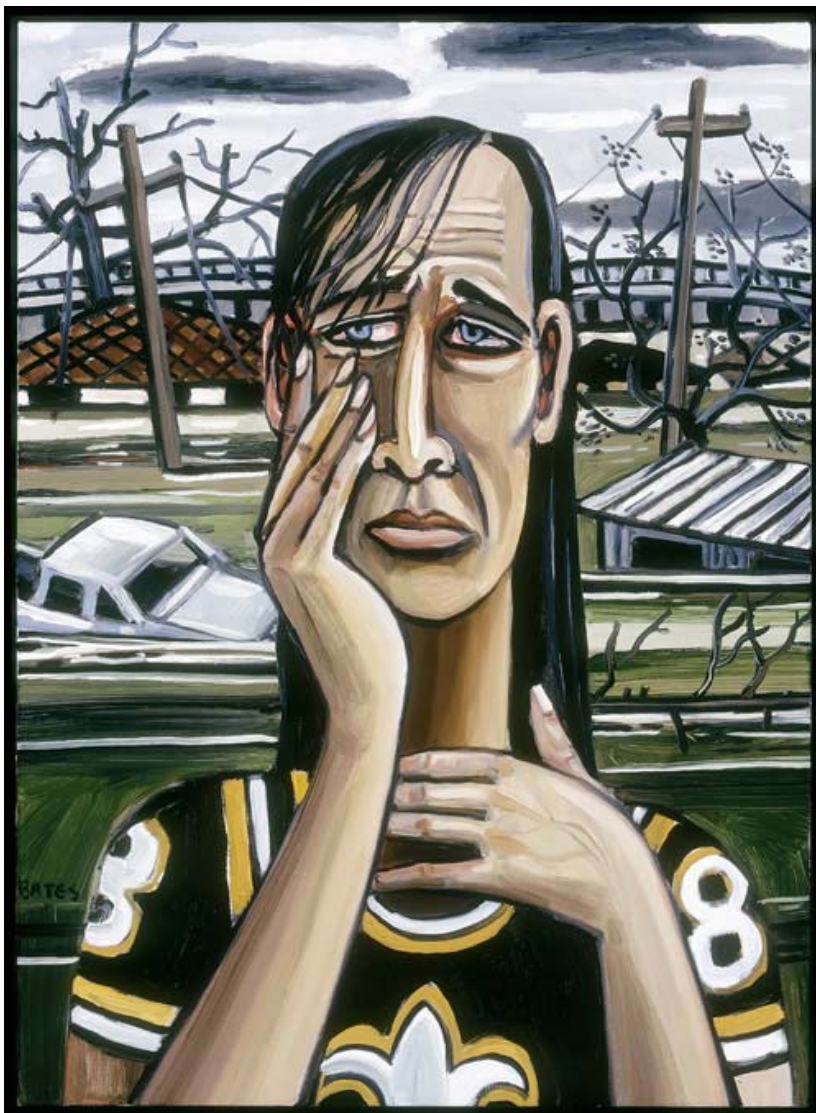
Bates paints his imagery with a thickness that gives the feeling of a rough-hewn piece of American folk art. Strongly outlined, the details in the hands and faces are not subtle. In 1975 and 1978, Bates earned both a BFA and an MFA in from Southern Methodist University. His paintings hang in collections throughout the United States, including New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Bates has been included in countless books, catalogues and exhibition around the United States, including the Whitney Biennale in New York.

*Elysian Fields Avenue* (2007, oil on canvas) depict faded pink and yellow bungalows very nearly submerged in flood water. On one stoop, a woman sits with the water at her feet. For her, there is nothing to do but wait. Behind these homes, huge oak trees will not tumble even as everything else does. It epitomizes the natural order of the geography. People and structures come and go while nature is a constant.

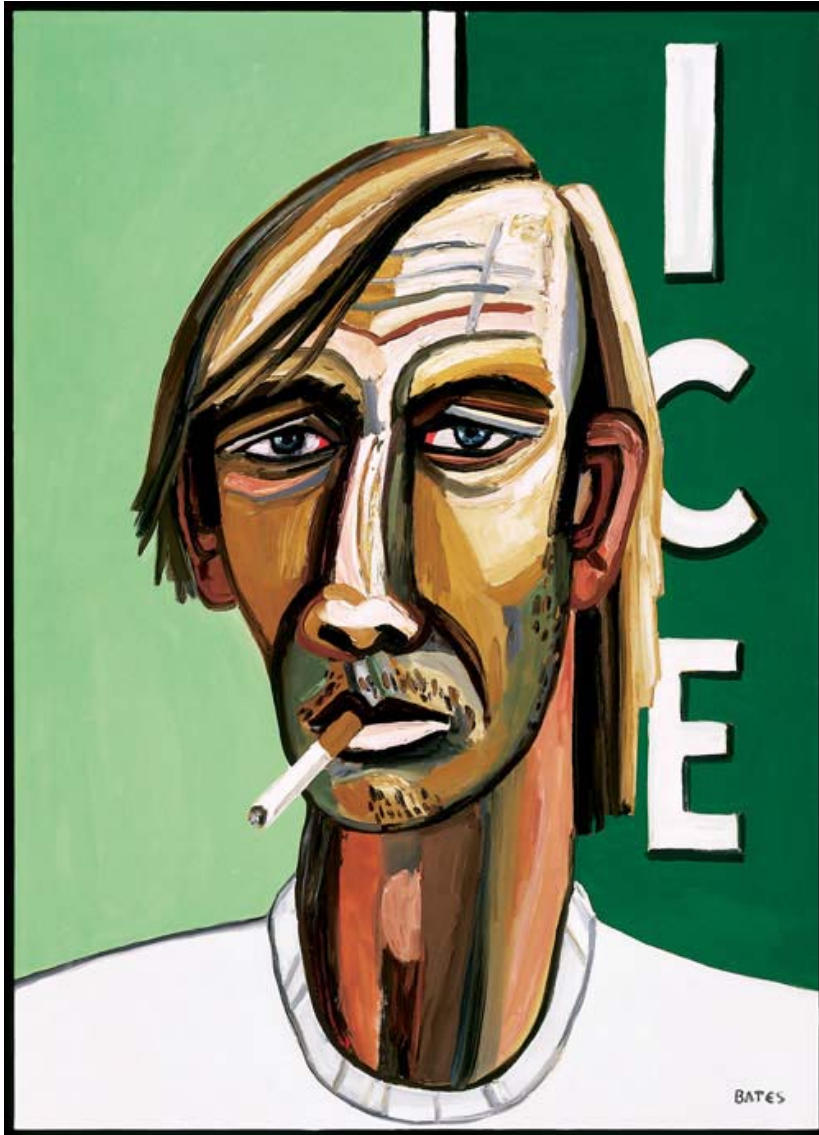
Bates choice of colors are used to highlight emotions. Where a sun is depicted, there is no light. Either obscured by clouds or painted in grays, no brightness is emitted. *Rescue* (2007, watercolor and charcoal on paper) and *The Deluge III* (2006-07 oil on canvas) are two examples of this. The pinks of eyes are noticeable, highlighting an intense exhaustion.

The only depiction of a street scene where one sees any strong color at all is *Katrina, The Garden District* (2006, oil on canvas) and that brightness comes from the fire of a burning buildings. It is one of the last paintings before exiting the gallery and the tumultuous piling of trees, electrical poles and structures must feel like watching Hades from across the River Styx.

Because of the Kemper Museum's unique architecture, exhibitions can feel either cramped or lost, but the size and scale of these paintings fit perfectly. This show is well-paced and it would seem impossible to leave unmoved by the subject matter.



David Bates, *Katrina Portrait IV*, 2006.



David Bates, *Katrina Portrait VI (Jimmy)*, 2006.

David Bates, *The Flood*, 2006-07.

