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HOLLAND COTTER Art in Review

Robert Moskowitz

Robert Moskowitz Blum Hellman Gallery 20 West 57th Street Manhattan Through March 21

The paintings in this show are characteristic of much of the work Robert Moskowitz has produced in recent years. He continues to give familiar subjects, often taken from pop culture, an iconic presence by cropping and magnifying them against monochromatic grounds. His technique is closely worked, with an admirable grasp of the material properties of both oil and pastel. The way the artist applies, scrapes away and reapplies pigment becomes an integral part of the physical and expressive weight of the images themselves. These images work best, however, when they are left ambiguous.

The painting of a black long-horned steer's head set sideways on a black field offers a number of possible references -- to cowboys, butchered animals, commercial logos -- while never fixing on one. The form of huge chain links set against a light ground suggests allusions to ships and manacles, and gains strength from keeping its meanings open.

It is when the work turns more specific or deliberately "poetic" that it fails to convince. "Vincent," a vertical canvas with a white sun and a single, dark, bird-shaped stroke on a yellow expanse, clearly evokes van Gogh's wheat fields. But by simply reducing an already popular and oversentimentalized image to its most familiar components, Mr. Moskowitz produces something very close to kitsch. There is no question that his intentions are serious, but it is only when the artist demands as much of his ideas as he does of his medium that his paintings really work.