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«Steve DiBenedetto's Playground of Plaint», John Yau, Hyperallergic, April 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Steve DiBenedetto's Playground of Paint

DiBenedetto is exploring a realm where figuration and abstraction have collapsed, and the body and the paint are inseparable.



John Yau | 4 days ago



Steve DiBenedetto, "Paramus Mars" (2018), oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches (all images courtesy Derek Eller Gallery)

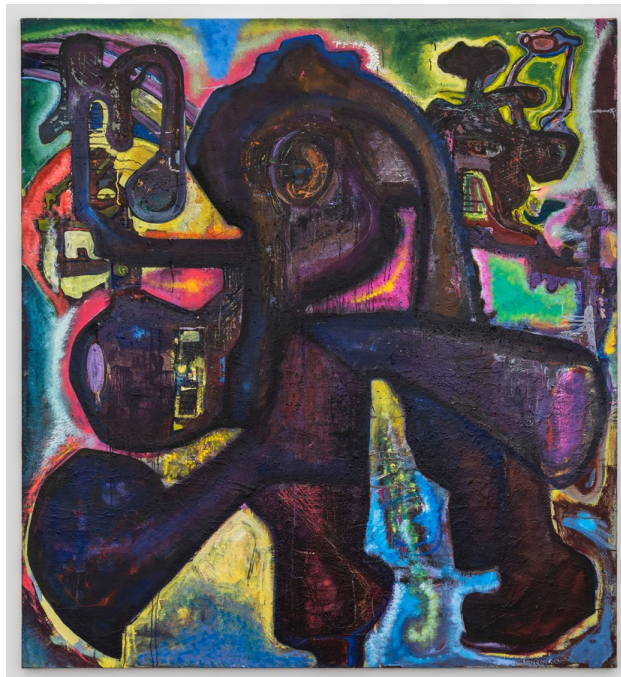
If by some chance you find yourself possessed by an inexplicable hankering to see what an artist can do with dirty bubblegum pink, I suggest that you head directly to the Lower East Side to see the exhibition Steve DiBenedetto: Toasted with Everything at Derek Eller (March 22-April 22, 2018). There are eight paintings in the show, ranging in size from 11 by 14 inches to 117 by 78 inches. Seven of them have some shade of pink in them. If Heraclitus, that clear-eyed observer of flux, chewed bubblegum, he would have said that you couldn't chew the same gum twice.

The paintings in this exhibition expand upon a move that DiBenedetto made in 2015, when in his last show at Derek Eller, Mile High Psychiatry, he turned away from his longtime signature

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motifs (octopi, helicopters, Ferris wheels and UFOs), which were all, as I wrote in a review of his 2016 show at Half Gallery, “radial forms extending from a central axis and pushing against the confinement of the painting’s edges.” By moving away from tentacles, propellers, disks, and wheels, DiBenedetto pressed himself to discover new forms. An unpredictable process thus became central to his method, replacing what had become a series of variations on established motifs.

In his Half Gallery show, *Steve DiBenedetto: Pre-Linguistic Granola* (April 12 – May 14, 2016), the artist showed 14 modestly scaled paintings populated for the most part by misshapen, head-like forms. In this exhibition, with seven paintings in a range of sizes, I got the feeling that DiBenedetto wanted to see how large he could go in an attempt to discover what kind of forms the scaled-up format would demand. How inventive could he be? Was it possible for him to make big paintings without repeating himself? These are questions that cannot be answered in advance.



Steve DiBenedetto, “Traipser” (2018), oil on canvas, 65 x 60 inches

As this show makes evident, DiBenedetto can make different-sized paintings with all of them packing a wallop. While there is a lot that they share, their distinct surfaces suggest that the artist ended up taking individual routes in completing them.

A body of some kind populates each one. If we want to consider precedents for bodies, I would say that DiBenedetto is attempting to wedge his way into a well-documented territory occupied by Francis Bacon, Willem de Kooning, and Jean Dubuffet. You’ve got to be very nifty and somewhat nutty, as well as possess a lot of self-confidence, to try this.

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Like these 20th-century masters, DiBenedetto is exploring a space where figuration and abstraction have collapsed together, where the body and the application of the paint have become inseparable. De Kooning famously said: “Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented.” DiBenedetto’s spin on this statement might be that the reason oil paint was invented was because it is the only material capable of showing what flesh can endure. And yet, while endurance suggests pain, it can also convey humor and resilience — as anyone who spent their childhood watching cartoons such as Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner would know.



Steve DiBenedetto, “Metaphysical Salami” (2018), oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches

Humor, pain, endurance, and humiliation — DiBenedetto seems to have channeled the weird, madcap drawings of Basil Wolverton, whose cartoons appeared regularly in the pages of Marvel Comics and Mad Magazine to reach this point in his art. Wolverton perfected what was affectionately called the “spaghetti and meatballs” style of depicting figures, something Ken Price and Peter Saul also picked up. Wolverton seems to have been besotted with the question: How funny can you make the grotesque and the repulsive? Or, to put it another way: Can you make your subjects look grotesque and funny without dipping into condescension or arrogance, like John Currin and George Condo, both full-fledged members of the “beautiful people” set?

The difference between DiBenedetto and Saul is that the former filters all of his doubts, concerns, and self-imposed challenges through what I see as his love for Abstract Expressionism, particularly the funky, clotted paintings that Jackson Pollock did in mid-1940s (which many critics dismiss in favor of the drip paintings). Saul — who seldom says anything nice about abstraction — sides firmly with the pictorial and uses paint to do all sorts of marvelous things, while DiBenedetto emphasizes process and does all kinds of unexpected

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things to the paint. In this regard, DiBenedetto is a relentless experimenter committed to working in oil paint on a stretched canvas.

In “Metaphysical Salami” (2018), a hairless, naked figure with yellowish skin seems to be wrestling with a multi-limbed linear, gunmetal blue form. The figure is understandably perplexed by what’s in his hands, which seems to be part snake (complete with hooded head, eyes, and red mouth) and part do-it-yourself jungle gym. The figure’s misaligned, oversized eyes, reflecting how most of us feel when facing a sheaf of IKEA assembly instructions, add a pathetic, funny note to the painting, which measures 60 by 48 inches and is one of the largest in the show. DiBenedetto’s figure is uncomfortable in his skin, a condition he seems to share with the other figures around him.



Steve DiBenedetto, “Toasted with Everything” (2018), oil on linen, 117 x 78 inches

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In “Toasted with Everything” (2018), the largest painting in the exhibition, DiBenedetto has concocted a gaggle of escapees from a bad horror film as a way of depicting the insides of our damaged psyches. Is it possible to make a Frankenstein out of used monster parts? Apparently, it is. The dominant figure on the painting’s far left seems to be a cephalopod made up of distinct sections: some appear metallic and riveted, while others come off as some kind of alien flesh. And in still other areas, the skin gives way to interior views, but of what? Among the many visually engaging, unexplainable passages of this painting — all of which have been reworked many times — there is an irregular green pentagon in which a red Christmas tree dotted with bright colors is visible.

This is DiBenedetto’s singularity. He finds unexpected ways to make a well-known territory fresh. In doing so, he arrives at surfaces that are blurred, scraped, gouged, blistered, peeling, distressed, and jammed with dabs of paint. They are perfect mirrors of our current state of fear and worry. To arrive at this point with empathy and humor makes the paintings all the more urgent and powerful.

Steve DiBenedetto: *Toasted with Everything* continues at Derek Eller (300 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 22.

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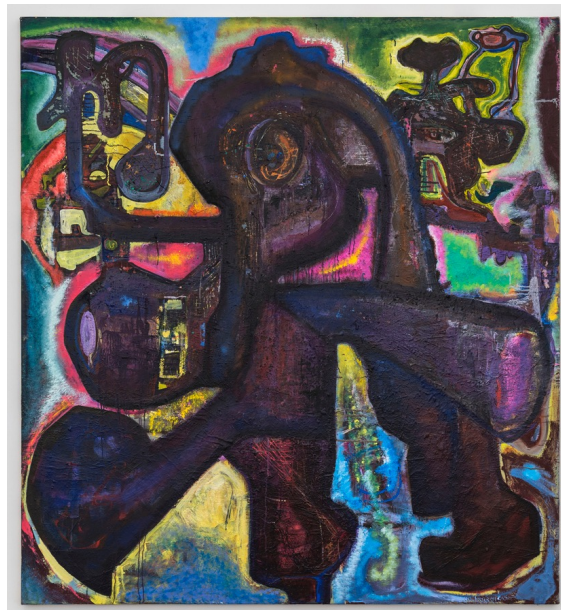
«Steve DiBenedetto: A Denatured Humanism», Dan Nadel, The New York Review of Books, April 2018

The New York Review of Books

Steve DiBenedetto: A Denatured Humanism

Dan Nadel

April 15, 2018



Steve DiBenedetto, *Traipser*, 2018

On the evening that I first walked out of Steve DiBenedetto's new exhibition of paintings, "Toasted with Everything," I looked up at the navy sky, down the asphalt street, and felt dizzy with euphoria. A later visit helped me articulate my pleasure: DiBenedetto had made sensual, profound, and profoundly imaginative paintings that are certain of their purpose but impossible to pin down. They are, as he told me later, like slot machines that never stop spinning. Watching the spinning numbers and symbols, which, in these paintings, are bodily masses and gracefully pulsating color applications, gave me a glorious buzz.

Steve DiBenedetto was born in 1958 in the Bronx and grew up in suburban New York, with frequent trips back to his home borough. He received a BFA from the Parsons School of Design and has lived in the city ever since. He first gained notice in the early 1990s with hallucinatory paintings filled with loaded symbols (some of them inspired by psychedelics theorist Terence McKenna's notion of human transformation) such as octopuses, UFOs, helicopters, Ferris

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wheels, and glass skyscrapers, accompanied by virtuosic flights into amorphous color blurts and geometries. DiBenedetto was and is interested in events that occur on the other side of the window of consciousness.

The current show is a distinct break from the tropes he has employed since the Nineties. In place of distinct symbols is a consistent use of vague, distressed humanoids as an armature for energetic inventions in paint and a renewed interest in unnameable emotional states (the artist warmed up for this current series by drawing images from his childhood copies of 1960s Famous Monsters of Filmland magazines). *Metaphysical Salami* (2018)—the humor of the titles betrays the artist's own sometimes goofy sensibility; he is a serious painter, but not self-serious—resembles a Hans Hoffman grid merged with a dopey creature struggling with aubergine tubular extrusions.

None of this would be so effective if it wasn't executed with DiBenedetto's paint handling. In and around the wall-eyed mass are luminous flashes of light, from rosy pinks to aquamarine blues, like mini-Turner paintings amid the chaos. DiBenedetto excels at building up and scraping away at layers of oil paint in order to produce a rough-edged finish, but he is equally adept at the graceful sinuous strokes one might associate with Brice Marden, as well as fluffy puffs of pigment.



Steve DiBenedetto, *Toasted with Everything*, 2018

In *Three Third Eyes* (2018) he also employs a staple of mid-century abstract painting—the modernist grid—to stunning and colorful effect, acting as a support for what looks like an assemblage of ingeniously imagined spare organs and limbs. But in every hulking form lurk moments of grace: in the center of the painting, a sky-blue patch illuminates a blue, red, and pink crystalline diamond. A tentacle hangs off the thing, its pincer pointing to what resembles the barest intimation of a pietà, aglow in blue light. The grid here is a hopeful mélange of aquamarines, pinks, yellows, and whites. Pictorial grids are perhaps the through-line for the artist, but rather than instrumentalizing them as physical objects, in these paintings DiBenedetto deals with the grid purely as multifaceted color-blocking. If all representational references fail, there is always the grid.

And within that space, DiBenedetto wants us to envision our own clumsy humanity. A recent Artnet interview by Ben Davis of Hal Foster might suggest a way to think of DiBenedetto's historical and philosophical roots. In discussing the idea of the "brut" in the work of Jean Dubuffet, Georges Bataille, Asger Jorn, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Claes Oldenburg, Foster identifies something that seems to echo DiBenedetto's project: "For all the sense of the catastrophe of humanism, they work very much in the name of the human—it's just a human that is very denatured.... They just want to make a humanism that's adequate to relate to the destruction of the human."

This kind of earnest, wide-awake, and self-aware humanism, very much of a pre-Seventies postmodern variety, is found in all of the paintings in the exhibition, and links DiBenedetto to his peers Huma Bhabha, Matthew Barney, and Carroll Dunham. In the titular painting, *Toasted with Everything* (2018), DiBenedetto achieves perhaps his finest large-scale work: tentative dabs combine with vicious scraping and loping thick curves to reveal creatures that would be at home with the Creature from the Black Lagoon and Frankenstein in Famous Monsters of Filmland, with shades of Jean Dubuffet and Peter Saul. But they are first and foremost creations of the physical act of brush and scraper on canvas—where once DiBenedetto layered his paintings with allusions to psychedelic phenomena, science fiction films and literature, and modernist architecture and machinery, now he is constructing his own, without any external references. They sometimes look as though he's coaxed slabs of meat together, Francis Bacon-like, with smooth chunks of granite. And then, sometimes, they are all sweeping strokes of color.

DiBenedetto encodes his works with ideas about paint as if to answer the question, What should a painting look like, in all its confusing, diffuse, and oddball glory, in order to make us feel that we're human and engaged? Three-dimensional spaces built of curved planes; a Christmas tree held aloft by a tentacle in a wash of violet and emerald space; a luscious flicker of green off a fully-petalled flower; a cobalt blue biomorphic form engorged with a yellow calligraphic swirl. I counted seven different eyes staring out of *Toasted with Everything*; they were not blinking.

"Toasted with Everything" is on view at the Derek Eller Gallery through April 22.

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« Painting Overtakes Pixels in Aldrich Museum Exhibition », Susan Hodara, The New York Times, February 2016

The New York Times

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Painting Overtakes Pixels in Aldrich Museum Exhibition

By SUSAN HODARA FEB. 18, 2016



Steve DiBenedetto, Cephlaglyph, 2010 Credit Chad Kleitsch

For the first time in more than 20 years, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum is filled exclusively with paintings. “Painting in Four Takes” presents concurrent solo exhibitions of four contemporary painters: Steve DiBenedetto, Hayal Pozanti, Julia Rommel and Ruth Root. Each artist has a distinctive toolbox of motifs and methods, resulting in works that are wildly different. But considered together, the shows attest to the flourishing of painting in a culture that is saturated by digital images, and to the expressive power of paint applied in all its variations by the human hand.

“In this virtual age, there is a hunger for the physicality of painting,” said Richard Klein, the exhibitions director at the Aldrich, in Ridgefield. “These are all works that you can’t completely understand unless you are standing in front of them.”

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The 10 new, large-scale paintings in “Ruth Root: Old, Odd, and Oval” are irregularly shaped, with eye-popping stripes, spots and geometric forms. Standing in front of any of them, museum visitors will see that what appeared to be a single unit is actually two panels, the upper made of patterned fabric, the lower of enameled and spray-painted plexiglass. They will notice that the plexiglass panel is attached to the fabric panel by curious looping folds, and that the whole work is suspended — seemingly precariously — by a few grommets.



Hayal Pozanti's “Sixty Seven” Credit Chad Kleitsch

The artist's largest pieces to date, the paintings are playful. Yet there is a friction between the two sections: the supple fabric, its repeating digital arrays designed online by Ms. Root, against the unyielding plexiglass, with its wavering hand-applied paint.

Ms. Root, 48, has been experimenting within the tradition of abstract expressionism for two decades, and the rest of “Old, Odd, and Oval,” which was organized by Amy Smith-Stewart, the museum's curator, provides context for her new works. In an adjacent gallery, the cockeyed, rounded edges of a group of small painted collages made from 1998 to 2003 signal the artist's abandonment of the rectangular format.

Upstairs, all the paintings in “Julia Rommel: Two Italians, Six Lifeguards” are rectangular, but Ms. Rommel, like Ms. Root, produced them in untraditional ways. She worked on her pieces for months, painting layer upon layer, wiping, sanding, sometimes cutting, repainting, stretching and restretching the canvases on stretcher bars over and over again. The ensuing images are thick expanses of color interrupted by wrinkles, folds, staple holes and embossed indentations. “They hold the memory of the way they were before,” Ms. Smith-Stewart said.

Seven paintings were made for the exhibition, which was curated by Ms. Smith-Stewart. All are abstract, with whimsical titles suggesting tiny, mysterious narratives. In the monumental “Moroccan Boyfriend,” overlapping planes of brilliant blues evoke a beckoning portal. Furrows and ghosts of staples cut horizontally across the pale green of the smaller “Healthy Breakfast.” The surface of “Relatives,” with its rectilinear divisions of soft blues and peachy pastels, is creased and slightly puckered, its rounded corners revealing how dense the paint has become.

“Two Italians, Six Lifeguards” opens with five older pieces, small monochromatic canvases that were painted by Ms. Rommel, 35, from 2010 to 2012. Even then, she was restretching and manipulating; the blue in a painting titled “St. Francis” was almost completely bleached away. Ms. Smith-Stewart described these works as “early vestiges of her process.”



Julia Rommel, *Relatives*, 2015 Credit Jason Mandella

Near the top of one of the new paintings, “Greetings From Uruguay,” a wide yellow brush stroke curves upward, as if escaping from the fields of yellows and blues below. Such a mark is absent in the other pieces. “That, to me, is the freest she has ever been,” Ms. Smith-Stewart said.

In the next gallery, “Hayal Pozanti: Deep Learning” pits technology against the human mind. Ms. Pozanti’s paintings and digital animations, all created for the Aldrich, are composed of characters from “Instant Paradise,” a 31-symbol alphabet that she invented. Like anthropomorphic hieroglyphs, combinations of ciphers frolic across her canvases, spelling out numbers that refer to data on human attributes that Ms. Pozanti, 32, unearthed online. The source material for a painting titled “One Hundred Twenty Two,” for example, is the number of dreams the average person was said to have monthly; for another painting, “18,” it is the number of variations said to exist in the human smile.

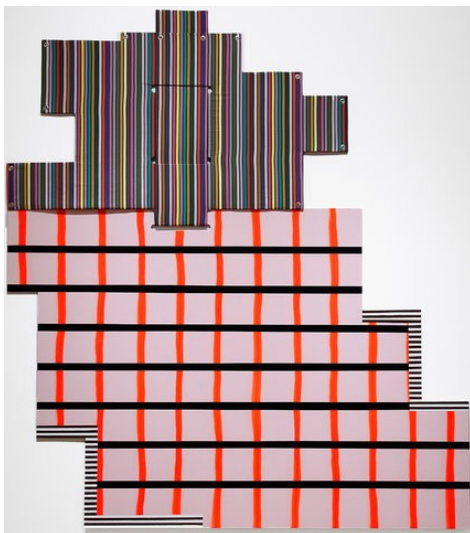
Initially, Ms. Pozanti’s work was heavily digital, relying on imagery appropriated from the Internet. She was propelled to painting by the need to bring tactility into her practice; Ms. Smith-Stewart said, “She wanted to make tangible things.”

patches of color. “She uses colors you would find on a digital color picker against more natural colors that she hand-mixes,” Ms. Smith-Stewart said.

Ms. Pozanti’s palette combines black and white with

On three monitors suspended from the ceiling, Ms. Pozanti’s characters stream horizontally and

vertically, depicting transcriptions of conversations that she conducted with chat bots in English and then translated into “Instant Paradise.” Accompanying them is Ms. Pozanti’s reading of the text in the phonemes of her lexicon. Her voice sounds robotic, except for brief spurts of giggling — “emotive sounds that she added to make it feel more human,” Ms. Smith-Stewart said.



Ruth Root, *Untitled*, 2015 Credit Ruth Root

“Steve DiBenedetto: Evidence of Everything” also contains an audio component, a four-channel sound installation in the stairwell between the first- and second-floor galleries where his paintings are hung. Titled “VTOL,” it is an improvisational blend of electric guitar, percussion (played by the artist) and altered helicopter sounds. Its pulsating rhythms shift from aggressive to hypnotic, dystopian to transcendent, a fitting soundtrack for the works on view.

Mr. DiBenedetto, 57, paints apocalyptic landscapes that teem with collapsing architectural structures, ominous helicopters, unruly octopuses and abstract labyrinthine patterns. “Evidence of Everything” presents 35 canvases made from 1997 to 2015. Standing in front of them, viewers will see dribbles, smears, assorted textures and sweeping brush strokes. “He’s trying every conceivable way of applying paint,” Mr. Klein said. “Look at the

subtlety of what someone's hand can do, the enormous richness and complexity.”

Mr. Klein, who curated Mr. DiBenedetto's exhibition, noted the artist's far-reaching inspirations, which include speculative and science fiction, psychedelic art and the film “Easy Rider.” Excerpts from authors including J. G. Ballard, Thomas Pynchon and William Blake are interspersed among the paintings, and one area holds a collection of ephemera — works on paper, photographs, books, album covers and other materials — culled from the artist's studio. Citing these and the show's title, Mr. Klein said: “We are attempting to give evidence of Steve's multilevel cultural influences. He's embracing a worldview that is very broad.”

That worldview, Mr. Klein said, has emerged in Mr. DiBenedetto's work. “As weird as his paintings are, they are not divorced from reality,” he said. “They are symbols of the chaos and instability in the world. I think ultimately his intention is to make paintings that make sense of our time.”

As for the intention of “Painting in Four Takes,” it is meant to be precisely what its name states: four separate painting shows. “We're not trying to make some overarching point about the state of contemporary painting,” Mr. Klein said. “It's impossible to do that.”

Instead, visitors can immerse themselves in the individual exhibitions, he said. “These are significant singular artists,” Mr. Klein said. “We're giving people four opportunities to have a meditative experience seeing their work in depth.”

“**Painting in Four Takes**” runs through April 3 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield. Information: 203-438-4519 or aldrichart.org.

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«Steve DiBenedetto by Dike Blair», BombMagazine, April 2003

Steve DiBenedetto by Dike Blair



Steve DiBenedetto, *Vortex*, 2002, colored pencil on paper, 22 1/2 × 30 1/8". All images courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery.

At that point one arrives in a place that defies description, a space that has a feeling of being underground, or somehow insulated and domed. In Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, such a place is called the "merry go raum," from the German word *raum*, for "space." The room is actually going around, and in that space one feels like a child, though one has come out somewhere in eternity.

—Terence McKenna, *"Tryptamine Hallucinogens and Consciousness"*

Steve DiBenedetto forces a lot of perspectives into his pictures. As he puts it, "I like to put in too many skies." There are patches of sky, and you can see panoramas, cross sections, core samples, micros and macros, but you can't read it all at the same time. This is not the systematized simultaneity of Cubism; this is a tortuous mindscape. You get sucked in,

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tangled and confused; you withdraw to get your bearings and then reenter the quagmire and beat a different path through DiBenedetto's shit. (He mixes his paints almost to that dead brown-gray point that painting instructors warn students against. And often, next to one of these near-fecal passages, he'll smear some out-of-the-tube primaries.) These worlds are made of circles, spirals and ellipses; they're held together by webs, tendrils, scratches, and drips; and they're packed uncomfortably into a rectangle.

The things—helicopters, octopuses, ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds—that churn these perspectives are also evocative as images. They summon from deep memory childhood's fascinations and fears. They are like *Apocalypse Now* directed by Terence McKenna, or *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Jacques Cousteau. Kind of. Even though DiBenedetto has used this same set of images in almost every recent work, they never coalesce into easy narratives. They function a little like Guston's cigarettes and shoe soles: they're important, but one is only sure why while viewing the picture.

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Steve DiBenedetto, *Psycopter*, 2000–01, oil on canvas, 48 × 60".

DiBenedetto works on multiple paintings over a number of months, or sometimes years. They get built up and wiped out. Every inch of the canvas gets stroked, diddled, and scraped. On a recent studio visit, I was surprised to see that the underpainting on some of these newer canvases was relatively serene and balanced. And in fact, along with turbulence, there is a lot of grace to be found within the finished paintings. His octopus's tentacles, his arabesques and runes all share a sinuous, serpentine elegance.

Though very much of the same spirit, his recent drawings charm where the paintings challenge. They forgo the paintings' creepy skin; instead the paper is covered with obsessive, clustered, flowing one-eighth-inch pencil strokes. The smaller scale and clarity of the drawings makes it easier to read things like an octopus's body morphing into an inorganic chromium vortex, or the speed blur of a chopper blade generating

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intricate lattices with peepholes into different realities. The drawings would fit easily into the Prinzhorn Collection, but for their understated hipness and formal savvy. From them I understand what DiBenedetto means when he says he's interested in making "cerebral folk art."

When I first saw DiBenedetto's paintings in the late '80s, my immediate (and obvious) response was "They look like bad trips." While the work remains undeniably psychedelic, drugs were never really the subject. I realize now that what DiBenedetto has always been interested in portraying is consciousness. He mingles images of the world with cellular and synaptic structures, making a kind of brain doily. Ultimately, the compelling discomfort that his work insists on is the confusion it creates between what is out there (the world) and what's in here (me). It's incredibly difficult to induce this sensation with art (of course, drugs *do* do it well), but DiBenedetto's unsettling art succeeds.