

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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## Back to the Future with Steve DiBenedetto

by John Yau on April 11, 2015



Steve DiBenedetto's current exhibition, *Mile High Psychiatry*, at Derek Eller (March 20 – April 18, 2015) marks a breakthrough for a painter who is best known for his encrusted surfaces jam-packed with helicopters, octopi and neural networks. As a fan who wondered where he could go with his paintings, particularly in the years following the work included in an eight-artist survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Remote Viewing: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing* (2005), the recent paintings prove once again that experimentation is not just the domain of young artists.



The octopus was believed to be the totemic animal of the human future by visionary ethnobotanist Terence McKenna, while the helicopter came from Francis Ford Coppola's groundbreaking film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). They were also images in which linear elements extended out from a central form, a way to animate a painting's surface. As symbols, they conveyed a decaying, dystopian world in which psychedelic drugs (or visionary experience) might be the only way for humans to reconnect with nature.

In his 2008 exhibition, *Chaoticus*, at David Nolan, which I reviewed for *The Brooklyn Rail* (June 2008), it was clear that DiBenedetto was trying to change, shake things up. He worked in watercolor and gouache on plastic sheets, which went against his long developed practice of building up his oil paintings. Working with watercolor and gouache on a non-absorbent surface required him to act quicker and to

be open to spontaneous decisions, which were the opposite of what he did in his paintings. Artists who are rooted in a slow and deliberate application of paint rarely change so radically, and the shifts don't necessarily augur well. But, as his current exhibition proves, DiBenedetto has transformed his work without giving up his love for encrusted, reworked surfaces and thick paint.

In an age of signature gestures and stylistic branding, artists who change and, more importantly, are able to expand the possibilities of their work are few and far between. The most obvious difference is that in his current show DiBenedetto has mostly jettisoned the symbols of the helicopter, octopus and Ferris wheel that routinely showed up in his work. But he has also

become more open to impulse and spontaneity. Not all the surfaces are built up, with "Sam Chinita" (2015) being the most obvious example. DiBenedetto has become more of an abstract painter and less of a symbolist, which isn't to say that the latter is necessarily a bad thing. It is just that DiBenedetto's vocabulary of symbols was beginning to lose its freshness and power. It strikes me that what he has done is go back in time in order to move forward, looking at the work done by Jackson Pollock, Gerome Kamrowski and Charles Seliger between 1940 and '46, before Pollock's so-called breakthrough, as well as the dark, mud-colored impasto paintings done by Jean Dubuffet in the late 1940s and early 1950s.



There are fifteen paintings in the exhibition, five of which are 60 x 48 inches or larger. The other ten paintings are 24 x 18 inches or smaller. It seems to me that in the largest paintings, DiBenedetto

sometimes feels pressured to put in everything he knows and knows how to do. He is not showing off, and I often find myself marveling at his paint handling and all the things he can make it do. In “Catholic Deli” (2013-2015), eight distinct shapes, each with a different surface, feel “collaged” to the largely flat yellow surface., while in “Bell Notes” (2008-2015), the octopus and helicopters become focal points to the detriment of the rest of the painting. Formally, the issue is the relation between the form and the ground, surface and space. It seems to me that DiBenedetto does not always have this worked out.



I do not want to suggest that DiBenedetto cannot handle a large painting, because he can, as attested to by the funny, klutzy, dancing, machine-like figure in the magnificent “I, Robot” (2015), which is a perfect merging of paint and image. In this and all the smaller paintings, attention shifts between image and surface without one superseding the other. DiBenedetto always has an eye for detail and for animating a figure, which he ought to bring into play more often. The shoe of the robot that is pressing against the painting’s lower right hand corner looks like a cross between a combat boot and a woman’s high-laced shoe from the Victorian era. The pose is jaunty. The oddness of it all feels perfectly right.

In “Biodynamic Radiation” (2015), the paint becomes lava-like in places, while elsewhere the surface is wrinkled like elephant skin. There are dots of paint further animating the form’s degraded state. Here, the paint speaks to our troubling dreams of what the future holds. In “Potato Battery” (2015), the knot-like linear structure, the encrusted surface, and the different enclosed areas, some pale yellow and others pale blue, work together to form a thing that holds our attention without ever become decipherable. The structure seems energized, as if some unseen current is flowing through it.



In contrast to his earlier paintings, what “Biodynamic Radiation” and such works as “Offers of Refusal” (2014-2015) and “We Blew It” (2015) prove is that DiBenedetto can be inventive when he trusts himself to find the painting’s interaction of figure and ground by being open to impulse and spontaneity, by being a painter of process rather than a maker of symbols. One sees such passages and areas in the larger paintings, too, but not always with such power. The linear, crystalline structures that he made in Chaoticus have led to a new place of exploration in his work. More than adding up to an image, the details hold our attention and compel us to continually refocus. This quality was present in his earlier work, but it is much more present in these recent works. DiBenedetto’s mutating forms (paint) may not be comforting, but that isn’t his goal. He is trying to get to something more

disquieting and fascinating. His manipulations of paint, and the disturbing associations it might bring to mind, are something to be reckoned with.

***Mile High Psychiatry*** continues at Derek Eller Gallery (615 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 18.

All images courtesy Derek Eller Gallery and the artist.

Steve DiBenedetto, “I, Robot” (2015), oil on linen, 60 x 48 x 1.25 inches

Steve DiBenedetto, “We Blew It” (2015), oil on linen, 20 x 16 x 1 inches

Steve DiBenedetto, “Potato Battery” (2015), oil on linen, 18 x 14 x 0.75 inches

Steve DiBenedetto, “Potato Battery” (2015), oil on linen, 18 x 14 x 0.75 inches

Steve DiBenedetto, “Sam Chinita” (2015), oil on linen, 22 x 18 x 1 inches

Steve DiBenedetto, “Biodynamic Radiation” (2015), oil on linen, 16 x 13 x 0.75 inches