

## The Daily

LOOK

# Headshrinker

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Steve DiBenedetto, *Reverse Epiphany*, 2015, oil on linen, 20" x 18".

If Thomas Pynchon writes systems novels, Steve DiBenedetto makes systems paintings—paranoid, erratic, vaguely interconnected. His latest exhibition, “Mile High Psychiatry,” up through Saturday at Derek Eller Gallery, has an air of zany premonition to it that put me in mind of Pynchon’s Tyrone Slothrop, who in *Gravity’s Rainbow* predicts rocket attacks with his erections: a carnal dowsing rod. There’s some of that rollicking terror in DiBenedetto’s paintings. You better figure this shit out, they seem to taunt, before your head explodes. (Fittingly, one of the more splattered numbers is called *We Blew It*.)

DiBenedetto’s earlier work was fixed on helicopters, Ferris wheels, and especially octopi. Those figures are still here, but abstracted, sometimes almost runic, surrounded by formidable blasts of texture and noise. *Take the Cannolis* and *Good Mystic vs. Bad Mystic vs. Tom Carvel* conjure brains on the brink of meltdown. *Sam Chinita* and *Biodynamic Radiation* have lurid pustules of color, thick enough almost to be popped, like zits. Much of the time you can talk about these paintings as you’d talk about something half buried in your backyard: they seem not just encrusted but mulched in paint and grime. Even the gallery’s release speaks of “scraps and globs and stabs and billows,” to say nothing of “prelinguistic slime.” That release, which I suspect DiBenedetto wrote himself with some relish, is weird enough to quote at length. He says of one painting: more

Fumes are just being sucked back into bodies of the composition's other passengers, including one octopus. This is not a basic octopus. Basic octopi are not socialized. They forgo language for body manipulation and alterations of skin color, communicating through a state Terrence McKenna describes as "both psychedelic and telepathic." Not this guy, this octopus has a chalkboard and he's learning how to make marks on it. He's a socialized (or social-ish) octopus and with one tentacle coiled around a nub of chalk he communicates to us his intimate thoughts about the paranormal, modern architecture, and the subplots of *Apocalypse Now* ...

DiBenedetto has referred to Peter Halley's work as "cave paintings for the future"—a line arguably more applicable to his own work. There's something of the Cro-Magnon in these paintings, if not the primordial ooze. Their "layered and distressed surfaces," Martha Schwendener noted in the *New York Times*, "lend them an aura of history and authority, like archaeological objects."

In a 2008 interview with *BOMB*—larded with such colorful questions as "What is your relationship to the color brown?" and "What do you like about the band Anal Cunt?"—DiBenedetto said, "I don't give a shit about making perfect, or even functioning paintings ... I'd like them to be simultaneously visionary, mundane, civic, and religious." The works in "Mile High Psychiatry" succeed to that end: they're hallucinatory but tangible, unstable but deeply grounded.



Steve DiBenedetto, *Hails from the Abyss*, 2015, oil on linen, 20" x 16".

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