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Thickly Layered Paintings that Glow with Their Own Light

If painting maps the mind, then Steve DiBenedetto must be a very interesting guy to hang out with.

Daniel Gerwin | February 23, 2017



Steve DiBenedetto, “An Opera of Paranoia” (2016), oil on linen, 40 x 60 in (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless noted)

LOS ANGELES — If painting maps the mind, then Steve DiBenedetto must be a very interesting guy to hang out with. His works are jam-packed with looping skeins of paint, figures that seem to be made of wire and cable, scraped or encrusted passages, and the occasional form that looks an awful lot like a scrotum. All these elements jostle and shove each other around, cohabitating in somewhat begrudging agreement.



Steve DiBenedetto, 'Novelty Mapping Picnic,' installation view (image courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles; photo by Jeff McLane)

I saw DiBenedetto's work at his solo show *Novelty Mapping Picnic*, a compact exhibition of 10 paintings ranging from small to mid-size. The room was lambent with the soft radiance of the canvases. DiBenedetto was there, visiting from New York, and he told me that when a painting starts to glow with its own light, he knows it's about done.

His work looks nothing like that other master of chromatic light, Wayne Theibaud, whose orderly rows of desserts contrast starkly with DiBenedetto's chaotic, densely twisted environments, but both artists eschew the illusion of light in favor of luminosity through color relationships. Theibaud juxtaposes saturated hues and tinted whites to make his images shine with such clarity that even his shadows are incandescent. His are pictures of desire, to be sure, but also of a world in which everything is in its proper place. DiBenedetto, on the other hand, makes plenty of room for murk in his paintings, surrounding forms with unnatural colors that pop and bloom. His worlds are maze-like and disemboweled, playing Mr. Hyde to Theibaud's Dr. Jeckyll.



Steve DiBenidetto, “Apprentice” (2016), oil on linen, 48 x 60 in

“An Opera of Paranoia” (2016) is a good example of the artist’s more dystopic vision. Two figures, more robotic than human, face each other and shake hands (or appendages) in what seems to be a less-than-happy meeting. Painted in dark indigo and matte orange, they are surrounded by a fuchsia halo that fades to midnight blue at the edges of the canvas. Across the room, on the opposite wall, is “Apprentice” (2016), in which a large orange/red shape, just barely recognizable as a figure, looms over what appears to be a torqued blue pinball machine, while between them are several bizarre round forms, including the previously mentioned scrotum. The pinball machine emits a yellow/red/pink light, while the remainder of the canvas is effulgent with acid yellow, rose pink, and emerald green. Both pictures are psychic spaces riddled with anxiety and stress — nowhere you’d ever want to live. Nevertheless, these are wonderful paintings to look at, allowing you to begin with the picture’s simple organization through large structures and then get lost in the endless detail, seductive color, and tiny virtuoso marks.



Steve DiBenedetto, "Green Line" (2016), oil on linen, 20 x 16 in (image courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles; photo by Jeff McLane)

Though DiBenedetto is known for thickly building up his paintings over years, this exhibition includes several that are quite thin, barely more than a single layer. Especially striking among these is “Green Line” (2016), a small work whose titular line snakes around the canvas, surrounded by reds and pinks that emanate like neon. From six to eight feet away, the canvas has the ability to set your retina ablaze. “Calibration of Indifference” (2015), another smallish work, is much less lustrous, almost a drawing, made through an equally thin application of blues, whites, and purples.

One of the pleasures of this show is the unhurried encounter with DiBenedetto’s mastery of his idiosyncratic technique, achieved over decades. “Influx” (2016) is my favorite piece — a little carnival of a painting whose stunning relationships of hot pinks, acrid greens, and chilly yellows has such a mystifying surface that even after DiBenedetto told me how he made it, I couldn’t really understand its construction.

ooks like a hallucinatory experience of a county fair, with suggestions of blinking lights, roller-coasters, and the Ferris wheel that the artist has used as a frequent symbol in the past. The lower middle of the picture features a series of curvilinear passages composed of marigold triangular forms that seem to have been made by scraping paint away. DiBenedetto explained that he’d used some sort of rubber tool, manipulating it like a squeegee, but I’m still scratching my head.

When he’s not in the studio, DiBenedetto is also a musician, and he told me he admires the way The Who developed their sound using just the basics: guitar, drums, and vocals — complexity built of simplicity. Like the best songs of that band, he makes his art with an energy, abandon, and freedom that is a wonder to behold.

[Steve DiBenedetto: Novelty Mapping Picnic](#) *continues at Cherry and Martin (2732 S La Cienega Blvd, Los Angeles) through March 4.*



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Steve DiBenedetto, "Influx" (2016), oil on linen, 20 x 16 in