

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

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 nervy and somewhat nutty, as well as possess a lot of self-confidence, to try this.

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

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

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.