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## Excess Devoured: Steve DiBenedetto at Derek Eller

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Steve DiBenedetto: Toasted with Everything at Derek Eller Gallery

March 22 to April 22, 2018  
300 Broome Street, between Eldridge and Allan streets  
New York City, derekeller.com



At what point does a painter give up discovery in favor of control? When do innovative impulses give way to the necessity of structured action—or, indeed, the other way around? Is a painting’s “expression” separate from its aesthetic “vitality,” or are the two innately wedded? Every painter likely grapples such questions, but with Steve DiBenedetto they seem to be at the forefront of his artistic project.

Those familiar with DiBenedetto’s earlier work the paintings shown in the 2005 Whitney Museum exhibition, “Remote Viewing,” for instance will recall mazelike scenes of octopi and helicopters engrossed in eschatological, psychedelic warfare. More recently, the painter has shifted towards more abstract, ambiguous forms, but the new lexicon retains the intensely saturated color, maximalist paint application, and meandering sightlines for which he is renowned. In his current show at Derek Eller Gallery, “Tosted with

Everything” DiBenedetto has birthed a family of “vibrant mutants” (as the exhibition’s press release names them) that tangle and wrestle with one another; at times they coexist, at others they might devour their own like Cronos. The eight paintings on view here take the question of “aliveness” within gestural expressionism to an almost symbolic level.

While in comparison with earlier painterly excesses these new works seem somewhat pared-down, DiBenedetto remains a leading exponent of randomness and chance. Pigment is added and removed from his canvases in more ways than one can name, let alone count. Whether brushed, squeezed from the tube, or knifed on, colors cut and bleed into one another to create unpredictable surfaces that reward close viewing.

But stepping back, the energy generated by this freewheeling textural hedonism is often bounded by strong lines that direct the eye and build form. Paint is allowed to speak, but within rational limits that confine at the same time that they organize. Paintings like *Three Third Eyes* (2018) bear the mark of cubism as much as, if not more than, gestural expressionism.



Much of this has to do, I think, with the coherent separation of figure and ground that DiBenedetto insists upon. Though the two smallest works in the exhibition, *Paramus Mars* (2018) and *Inverse Evidence* (2018), are surface-oriented and nearly non-spatial, the rest of the paintings depict one or more figurative “mutants” hovering in front of abstract, colorful backdrops. The distinction is made often by the chiaroscuro of dark figures against a bright field. Elsewhere, strong outlining defines the body against its milieu. Although DiBenedetto’s backgrounds are as texturally unpredictable as the “flesh” of the mutants themselves, their spatial flatness and shallow depth contribute to the sense of control forced upon these wild monsters.

The claustrophobic compositions found within this exhibition only heighten this restrictive mood. DiBenedetto experiments well with scale in his largest paintings, such as the exhibition’s

namesake, *Toasted with Everything* (2018). At almost ten feet high, this work on linen shows four or five distinct and inimitable bodies that linger in uneasy coexistence. (The glassy, tear-welling eyes of the Mayan figurine is one of the few explicitly poignant moments in the exhibition.) Most other paintings, however, depict one central mutant taking up most of the canvas though rarely transgressing its outer boundaries. Arms, legs, tentacles bend, meander, and weave, but typically turn back on themselves just before exiting the frame of view. The “window” of the canvas is more like a cage in DiBenedetto’s usage of the convention. Compositional moves seem intelligent and self-aware, as if in themselves a metaphor for the ineluctable limitations of paint on canvas as a vehicle for the imagination.

I’ve lingered on the restraint conveyed by these so clearly exuberant works because I think it touches on an exciting paradox of energy and vitality. It seems clear that by moving to this more self-contained, even poetic world, DiBenedetto has created for himself a working space that ironically allows for unexpected things to happen more often. It is precisely the shallow depth in which his mutants sit that enables their ambiguous, biomorphic forms to shift and transform in uncanny ways. The tension created by their sense of capture is tragicomic. DiBenedetto’s painterly unpredictability is all the more potent when considered against the sturdy forms constructed by line and chiaroscuro.

For a painter so well known for inordinate, mannered excess, whether of surface or symbolism, DiBenedetto’s recent move to making more subdued and abstract pictures is all the braver. The successes and range demonstrated in this exhibition suggest that the gamble has opened up a fertile path.

