
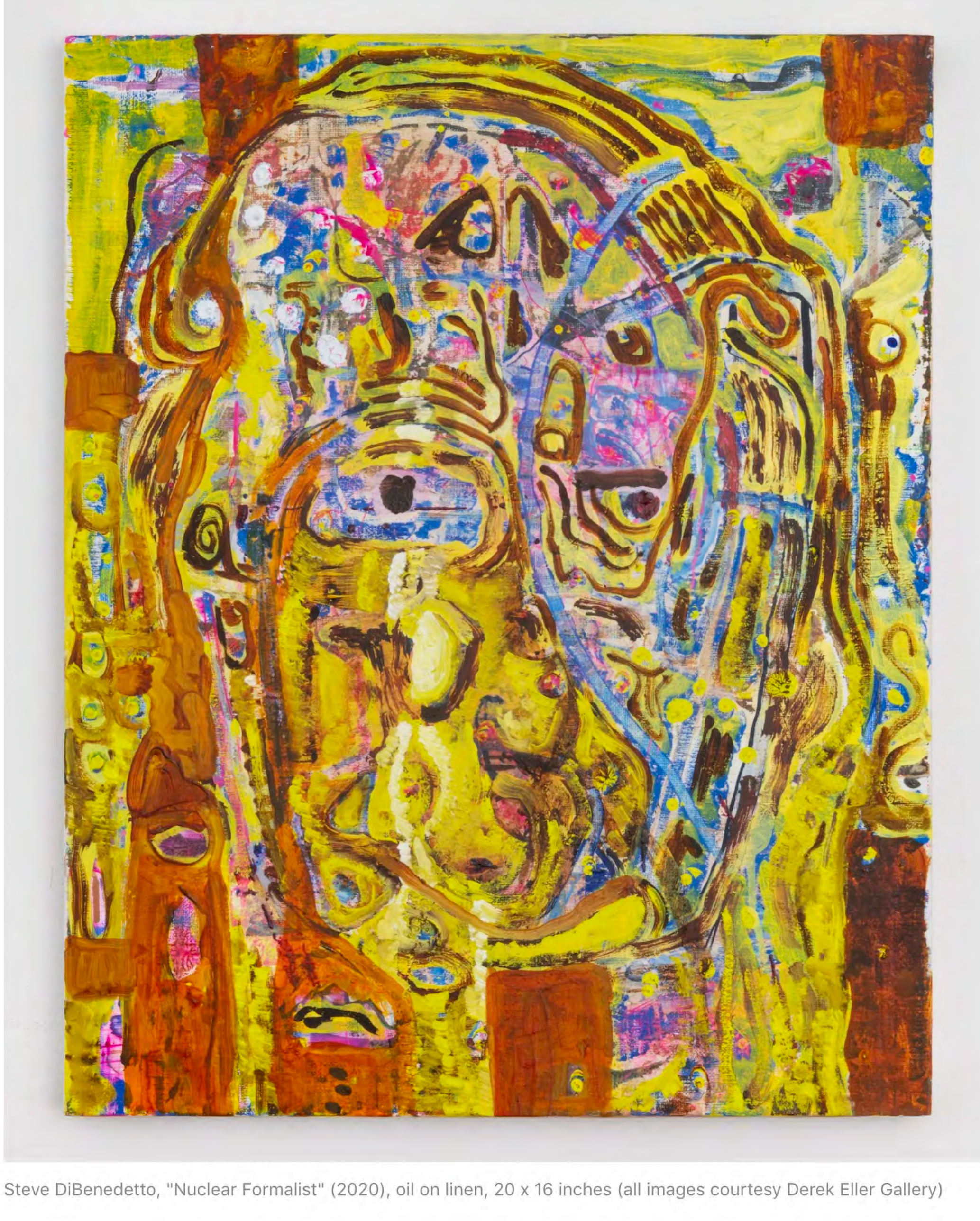


Art

Steve DiBenedetto's Raw Nerves

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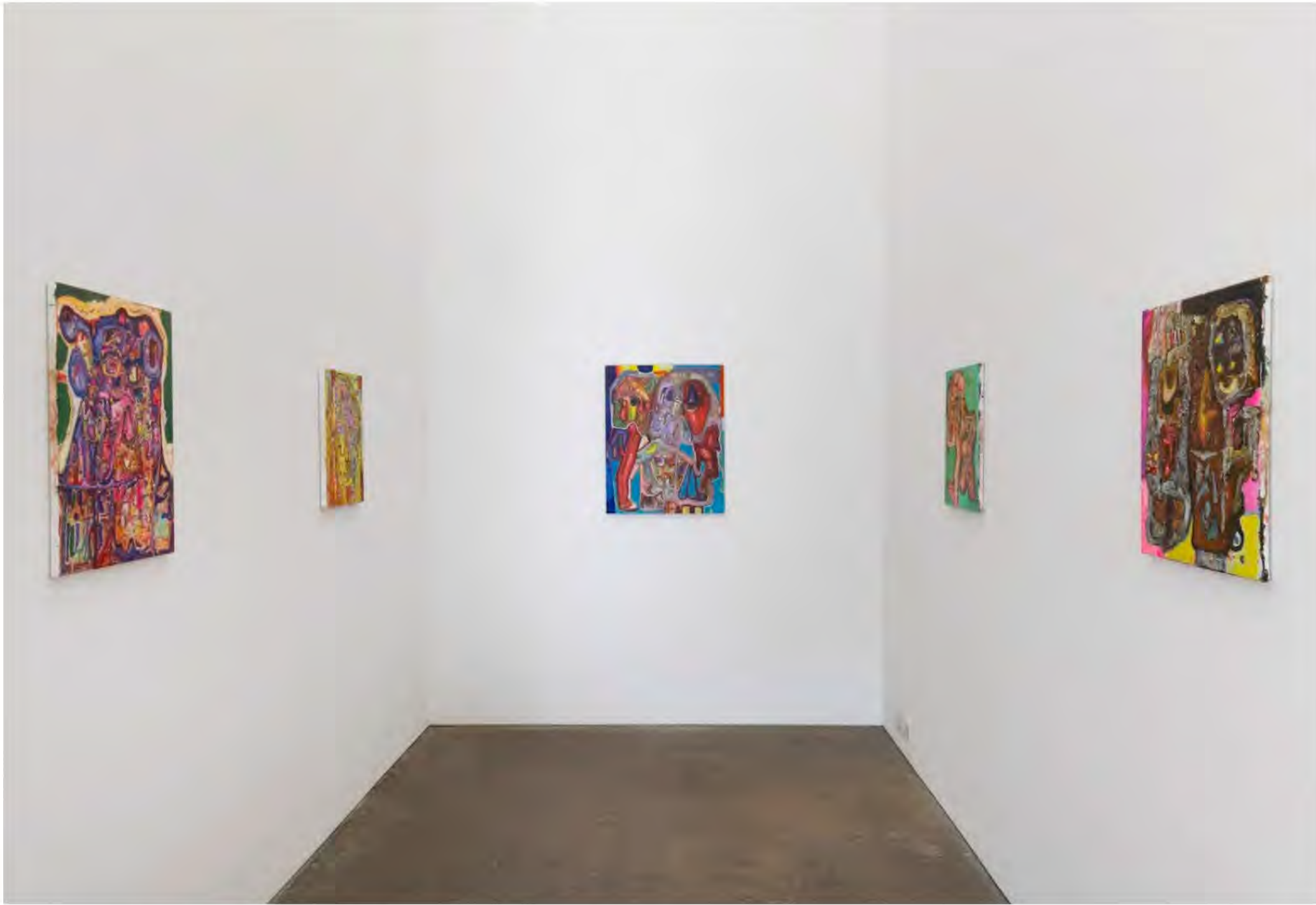
 by John Yau



Steve DiBenedetto, "Nuclear Formalist" (2020), oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches (all images courtesy Derek Eller Gallery)

One thing that distinguishes Steve DiBenedetto from his contemporaries is his capacity to make delicate colored pencil drawings as well as manipulate gobs of thick paint. His ability to draw informs his painting and enables him to be inventive rather than developing and sticking with a signature style.

In his most recent exhibition, *Steve DiBenedetto: Neon Bog* at Derek Eller, which closes on December 23, the six modestly sized portraits displayed in the gallery's Project Room continue the trajectory that he started to define in 2015, when he turned away from his signature motifs (octopi, helicopters, Ferris wheels, UFOs) and began to focus on misshapen torsos and head-like forms.

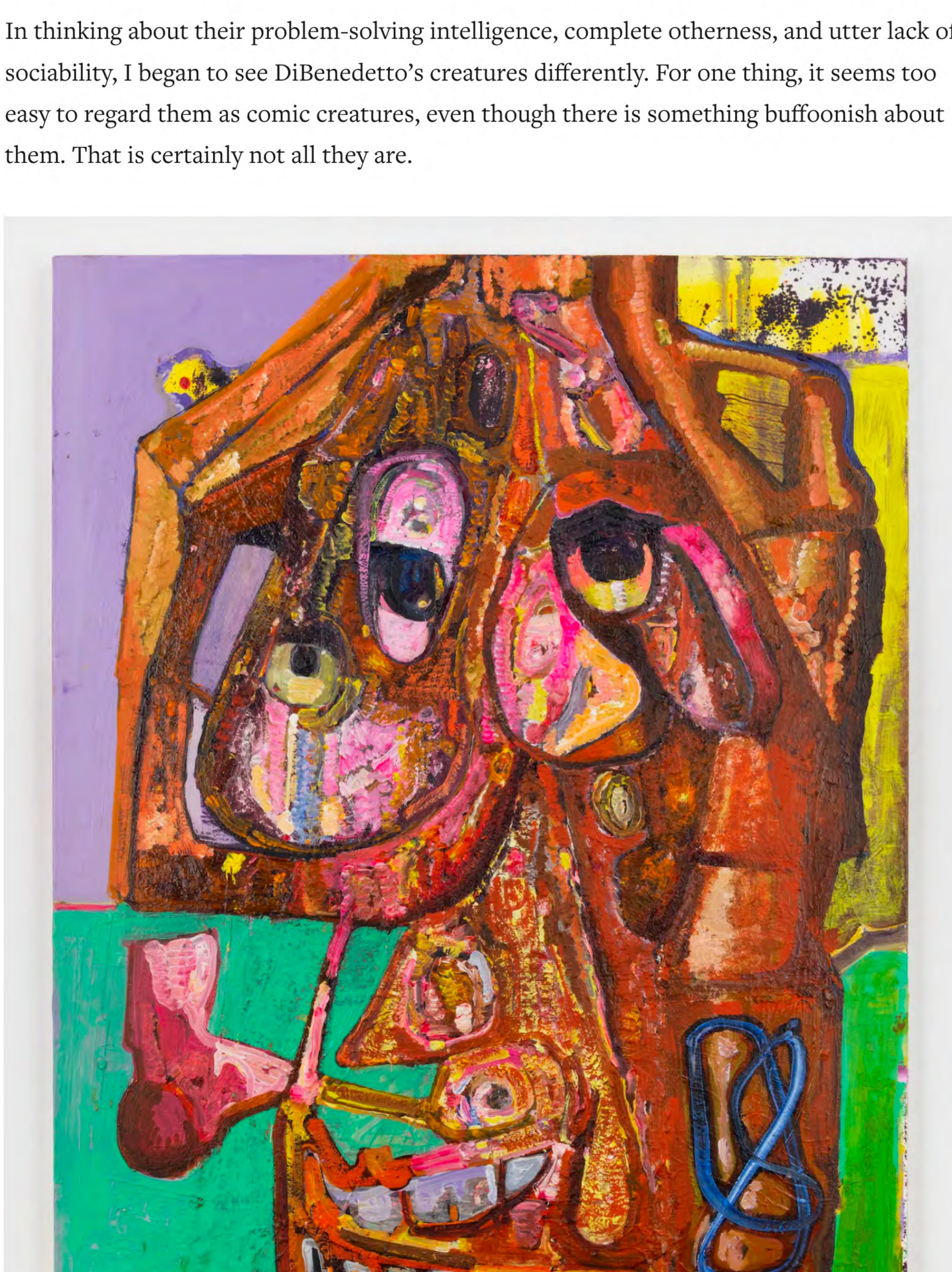


Installation view, *Steve DiBenedetto: Neon Bog* at Derek Eller Gallery, New York

The brilliant ethnobotanist and mystic Terence McKenna (1946-2000) believed the octopus was a totemic creature capable of telepathic communication. "Plant Based Mind Control" — the title of one of the paintings in the exhibition — suggests that DiBenedetto is familiar with McKenna's writings about heightened states of consciousness and the use of psychedelic drugs to reach such states.

In his book *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness*, Peter Godfrey-Smith writes about the kind of intelligence that the octopus possesses. He is not alone in considering octopi — unsocial creatures capable of changing colors and blending in with their environment — are among the most intelligent animals inhabiting the planet. They are the closest we come to having contact with an alien intelligence.

In thinking about their problem-solving intelligence, complete otherness, and utter lack of sociability, I began to see DiBenedetto's creatures differently. For one thing, it seems too easy to regard them as comic creatures, even though there is something buffoonish about them. That is certainly not all they are.

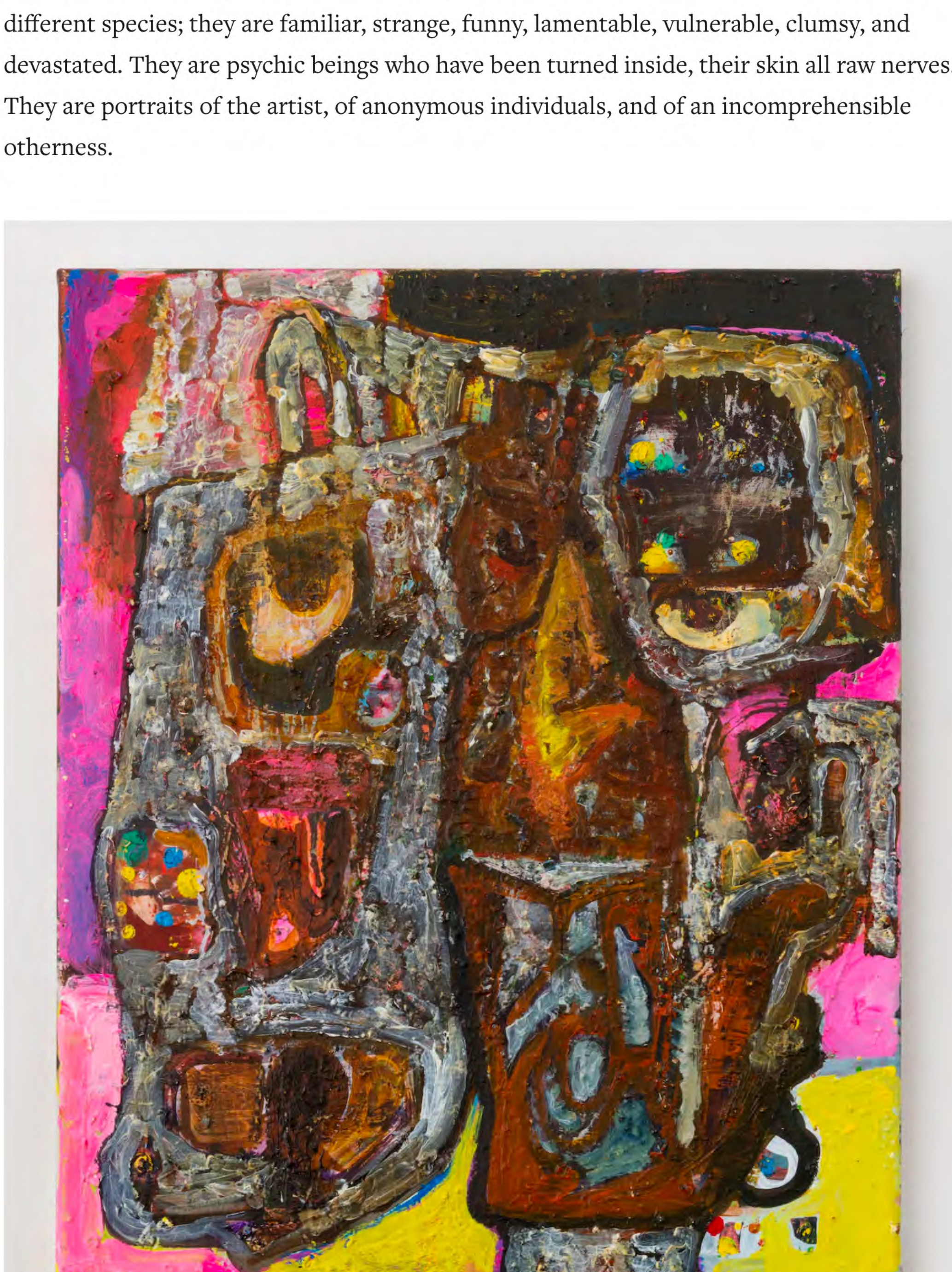


Steve DiBenedetto, "Ochre Vampire" (2020), oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches

I also suspect that I have not given enough attention or credit to DiBenedetto's ability to draw upon a wide range of resources, from comic books to the latest research in mind-altering drugs and studies in shamanism.

In "Ochre Vampire" (oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches, 2020), the largest painting in the exhibition, the creature has three eyes. Does the middle eye signify an awakened consciousness? What am I to make of the fact that the eye on the right reminds me of a basset hound, which is known to be patient and low-key? What about the electric blue line on what could be the creature's forearm or leg? Is it an occult sign? How do all these perceptions square up with the painting's title?

This is the real strength of DiBenedetto's paintings. The figures look like they come from different species; they are familiar, strange, funny, lamentable, vulnerable, clumsy, and devastated. They are psychic beings who have been turned inside, their skin all raw nerves. They are portraits of the artist, of anonymous individuals, and of an incomprehensible otherness.



Steve DiBenedetto, "Plant Based Mind Control" (2020), oil on linen, 21 x 17 inches

In "Nuclear Formalist" (oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches, 2020), DiBenedetto uses brown and blue lines to depict the outlines of a yellow-skinned head. The lines look as if they could have been squeezed from a nearly empty tube of toothpaste. In contrast to the impasto surface of "Cyber Feral" (2020), the surface of "Nuclear Formalist" is not as built up.

The acid yellow skin is barely separated from the largely yellow ground. Starting at the top of the head and arcing its way down to right side of the jaw, the blue line divides the face into two unequal sections, suggesting a split consciousness. This reading is enhanced by the eyes, which are mismatched, perhaps because one is looking out and the other is gazing inward.

Where does one's consciousness end and the world begin? How do they interact?

Whatever the impulse that initiated the paintings, DiBenedetto clearly works everything out on the surface. Neither a plan nor a style guides him. He is not interested in trying to be charming or in appealing to the viewer's desire for entertainment or distraction. This is what connects him to that increasingly rare of strain of artists that includes Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Thomas Nozkowski, all of whom worked everything out and discovered their subject on the painting's surface. Like them, DiBenedetto's paintings reward long and repeated looking; they do not give away all their secrets in the first glance. That resistance runs counter to the current art world and its praise of accessibility, transparency, and namable subjects.



Steve DiBenedetto, "Mental Upholstery" (2020), oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches

The heads stare at us. They are not satirical. They do not grant viewers that ironic distance. Their skin is mottled, rough, and scarred. Sometimes, it seems as if they have been pulled from a fire, their skin blistered and swollen.

DiBenedetto has done something that I had not thought possible: He has transformed aspects of early Jean Dubuffet and Francis Bacon — both extreme stylists — into something all his own. Compare these paintings to his drawings, which can be made up of a dense maze of different-colored lines. It is obvious to me that an institution ought to assemble a survey of DiBenedetto's work of the past decade, and offer us a broader view of what this artist has been up to.

Steve DiBenedetto: *Neon Bog* continues at Derek Eller Gallery (300 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 23.