

# Steve DiBenedetto Chaoticus

by John Yau

**David Nolan Gallery May 10 - June 21, 2008**

Best known for his symbolic paintings—encrusted surfaces jam-packed with lattices, neural networks, cracked TV screens, helicopters, Ferris wheels, and octopi pushing against the painting's physical edges—Steve DiBenedetto first gained larger attention when his work was included in an eight-artist survey, *Remote Viewing: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing*, at the Whitney Museum of



American Art (2005). In that exhibition, DiBenedetto's invented world was infused with elements derived from science fiction, the speculations of the ethno-botanist, Terence McKenna, and the visionary German architect and painter, Bruno Taut; and from surrealism, particularly Max Ernst and Oscar Dominguez. In their density of detail and horror vacui, the paintings seem to channel the weird, fanatically detailed supernatural scenes of the Victorian painter, Richard Dadd, and JG Ballard's dystopian visions of a bleak, decaying, manmade landscape.

In his recent work, DiBenedetto adds to his symbolic vocabulary as he expands his material means to include gouache and watercolor applied to a plastic sheet. The change is interesting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it goes against the grain of the artist's temperament as expressed over the past decade, during which he built up his oil paintings and pencil drawings from an impressive array of marks. In the earlier work, everything felt as if it arrived slowly, bit by bit, like a mosaic. In the recent works on plastic, the fast-drying gouache and watercolor demand quick thinking and spontaneous action, which can invite impulsiveness and possible disaster. The results are remarkable because the artist is relinquishing his need to be in control, and allowing his motifs of change and mutation to be conveyed through splashes of paint and bleeding colors. All of this he seamlessly connects to complex, faceted, architectural structures. The other change is his opening up of space, and his growing mastery of it.

Set against modulated cerulean or magenta skies, DiBenedetto's multi-faceted, heat sensitive structures are either being attacked by an unseen force or imploding; this is a world in which people are absent, and everything is going haywire. The artist continues to embrace representation and abstraction, but, I think, is more successful here than previously in merging the two. An area of yellow tinged with red and orange can be read as an explosion, a burst of reflected light, and an abstract puddle of color. The faceted structures are the modernist grid in a state of entropy. The use of watercolor on a plastic surface endows the works with a glow that, despite the artist's hothouse palette, can feel cold or scorching, otherworldly. The palette largely consists of primary and secondary colors—magenta, thalo and cyan blues, and metallic greens—that seem far removed from nature. Typically, a latticed, faceted structure occupies the majority of the picture plane. Sometimes the structure seems like an animated being, the morphing of a human into a cyborg (are they stand-ins for the mechanical hybrids we are well on the way to becoming?).

In the best works, the details vie for equal attention with the whole, and the transition from the smallest bit of information (a single reflective panel or a suction cup from an octopus' tentacles) to the largest (a tall building or a primeval being) feels smooth if not also disturbing. In the juxtaposition of a large octopus against a multi-paneled tower, at once pristine and repellent, rising into the sky, it is with the creature that we feel the deeper connection. It's as if we are stuck between two poles (which is the mind and which is the body?) with no clear choice at hand (Robert Frost's well-known poem about this dilemma seems more quaint by the minute). Crisis, change, and destruction are at the core of DiBenedetto's concerns, and, to his credit, he never permits them to descend into clichés. His viewpoints are deliberately distorted, offbeat and even grating. He tries to maintain the view of a witness, rather than a judge.