



STEVE DIBENEDETTO

by DAVID HUMPHREY

It's holiday time with family. I look down at my slice of fruit cake and am transported back to Steve DiBenedetto's studio with his paintings of jewel-like colors embedded in dense fields of sticky brown. I visited him a month ago to talk about his work and found not just his well-known visionary image-webs but a new group of paintings depicting invented glass and steel buildings. Memory and vision are folded into turbulent atmospheres of corporate strangeness. My senses must have been recalibrated as I'm now seeing DiBenedetto's work echoed in the ornamental snowflakes and strings of colored lights celebrating the birth of the crucified one.

DAVID HUMPHREY What do you like about the band Anal Cunt?

STEVE DIBENEDETTO Unruliness doesn't even begin to define these guys. They're utter chaos on stage. Which is the most satisfying thing to me about that whole genre of heavy metal; it's a metaphor for chaos. It also extends into the really *out* kind of jazz I've always loved—Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, or Cecil Taylor, especially his early records where you have these relatively conventional bebop tunes becoming contaminated by distorted, awkward phrases—you know, that feeling of everything being on the verge of falling apart and giving way to raw energy. Soundwise, I call it the "swarm." I'm thinking of this band I saw once, Hate Eternal, for example. And Taylor for sure, when the rhythm and notes are pretty much atomized.

DH That describes your painting. There's a ferocity in metal, though, that is different from jazz and from what I detect in your paintings. But I think you share the experimental jazz delight in catastrophe. Do you like the more athleticized speed metal?

SdB Some, but it's always weird when the genre becomes too impure. I think about this with painting all the time. How can the format be stretched and still aesthetically be painting. To me it's always been most interesting to approach painting from a messy, reckless, stressed-out place.

DH You're constantly toying with the limits of order, of genre, and I feel that at this moment in contemporary art, any idiom is possible. The historic narratives that used to fuel artists and propel their work have collapsed, and you are optimizing that state.

DH Many contemporary buildings seem to be parodies of earlier buildings, so are you making parodies of parodies? But unlike your other paintings, these have less catastrophic potential. Or, if there is a catastrophic element, it seems to be in the weather.

SdB **Yeah possibly. A year or two ago, for no reason I could define, I kept getting all these promotional packages with glossy photos from Ian Schrager operations, like this Herzog & de Meuron Prada joint. They kept accumulating, these postmodernist, megacurrent buildings. In the past I used more baroque architectural references, interiors that I could get lost in, that were psychedelic; they lent themselves to my hyperactive visual approach.**

DH Baroque and church interiors convey an elaborated iconographic imagination that newer geometric structures don't. But you have extended that mathematized imagination by suggesting morphological analogies between crystalline forms, the helicopter and the octopus. They become a radiating hub and spoke form, a principle of organization, a trippy structural unit.

SdB **Yes, the buildings are outgrowths of geometric forms that have been occupying my paintings, like the ferris wheels. The amusement park is where we go to experience outrageous disorientation. When you're being traumatized on some roller coaster, you're in this ahistorical dimension, utterly in the moment.**

DH Sure, when you *pay* to have your equilibrium completely thrown off.

SdB **Human beings are constantly searching for ways of escaping the trauma of dealing with the passage of time, of death.**

DH Or the trauma of everyday life. (LAUGHTER)

SdB **The neutrality and the boredom of it, the amnesia. I think we're living in a time where buildings are not inspiring. New, celebrated buildings look like giant blown-up sculptures. Why can't architecture be more eccentric, more bizarre, or even honest about its connection to ancient forms, the ziggurat or the Tower of Babel? Didn't Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown propose some really weirdo architecture via Las Vegas? That's what I'm wishing was being made, say a log cabin for the first level of a giant skyscraper. I don't know, just more confused-looking buildings. If buildings were schizophrenically designed where one half—like some of these drawings start to articulate—is this unbelievably perfect glass structure and its other half is some dark, ancient Cambodian looking pagoda. To what extremes could those exist? I'm not really interested in being a pseudoarchitect though...**

DH I think these are entirely buildable.

SdB **They are, right?**

DH Absolutely. I love the one that looks like the geometry is being sucked into this navel-like vortex.

SdB **That one with the yellow? That was the first one actually. It works well for me too.**

DH They contain their own potential as a ruin.

SdB **There's space to play with here, as visionary potential study or just studying things. And I like the idea of working on these totally from memory.**

DH It's you, the straight-edge, and your imagination.

SdB **In a sense, and often with a very fucked-up perspective, which is fine with me. I'm rereading this Smithsonian essay "Ultramoderne," where he's talking about those famous apartment buildings that were built on Central Park West in the '30s, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building—that they were all infused with motifs that connected to distant historical references like Aztec and Mayan temples. Then he goes into a whole brilliant thing about mirrors and what mirroring presumes to provide, like everything from a total confusion of space to undelivered promises.**

DH So much '30s architecture, built across the globe under a variety of ideologies, seems to contain authoritarian overtones. Mussolini could have built the Hoover dam. I love those odd cross-cultural details within the structure's streamlined modernity.

SdB **Regardless, I don't know how else to put it—they looked like buildings. What is it about today's buildings that they look like sculptures? There's a fundamental crisis now regarding scale. What does it mean to walk into a giant edifice that looks like it was once a tiny model on a developer's table? Buildings like the Empire State Building don't look like blown-up versions of anything. If we wouldn't accept it as sculpture, why accept it as a building?**

DH Are you saying that the new buildings are conjuring the studio from which they came, that the experience of scale is like walking into a hyperenlarged version of a model?

SdB **Yeah, throw in the available forms on the computer and then wiggle your mouse and suddenly you can build any crazy line. I mean, these are exciting things, but they're more like novelty experiences. A friend of mine referred to Gehry's original scale as crumpled-up paper.**

DH It's a really great moment in architecture, to the extent that these issues are staged in such a public way; new buildings and critical perspectives are rolling out so quickly. I'm interested in the way the buildings in your new paintings intersect with turbulent weather through their reflectivity. The weather is transformed on their surface. Gehry of course is really hip to this, especially in his new building on the West Side Highway here in Chelsea.

SdB **I like that thing. It looks like a big iceberg that just washed up.**

DH Both in reflectivity and form it seems responsive to the habitat. The buildings in your paintings resist, reflect, and transform the weather that envelops them. I think this kind of lensing or mirroring operation is at the core of your practice.

SdB Well, actually hearing you describe it that way, Isn't the building facade just another surface where painting could occur? I mean, when I forget about the polemical architectural issues, I realize that I'm kind of living in each one of these little windowy facets. I am more and more utterly fascinated by walking around the city. I'm looking at all these facades and every little window has a distorted abstraction in it.

DH So, each one of these paintings is really a medley of hundreds of little abstract paintings.

SdB (LAUGHTER) Chuck Close will love to hear that. And Smithson, the guy I just can't seem to avoid, talks about facades and mirroring and transparency. In a weird way, we almost want new buildings to disappear. We want them to be these monumental, authoritative things but also reflective and transparent. There, but not there.

DH Towering apparitions.

SdB I like this weird combination of power and nothingness.

AUTHENTIC FICTIONS

DH That takes us back to the argument of heavy metal music. I find its authoritarian aggression thrilling and a bit frightening.

SdB Well, as we know, one branch of Norwegian musicians really did murder people and burn down amazing churches. But let's face it, we go to those shows and listen to that music to have that stimulation—"Shit, this might cross the line at some point." I remember talking to Banks Violette about why irony is okay in art, but not in music because the threat can't be buffered. The Rolling Stones used to function that way; they were the devil's band at one time.

DH But it's all theater, a fiction of authenticity.

SdB Peter Handke's *Insulting the Audience* corrupts the notion of the audience's safety, the impermeability of the fourth wall.

DH It's challenging to interpret—if the performer is saying, Fuck you to the audience, and their response is, Yes, said with great relish and air-punching satisfaction; who hates whom?

SdB The thing about all this metal or rock, pop culture shit, is it's really meant to give us an option to just get lost in it. When I go to see the best shows, I'm banging my head going, This kicks fucking ass. It leaves pondering and conceptualizing behind.

DH So there is a connection between the amusement park thrill-rides, drugs, horror movies, and super-extreme metal performances.

SdB Anything that puts you in a visceral place—

DH Up close to a sense of your own annihilation while being, if not completely, somewhat safe.

DIRTY OPTICS

DH I wrote the words "Dirty Optics" thinking about your use of brown as a traditionalist element, the color of shadow in much old master painting or underpainting, with an earthbound, scatological component to it. What is your relationship to the color brown?

SdB The first thing that comes to my mind when color is brought up is the image of melting toys on a beach, in some hot sun. . . I guess I see it as an involvement with a bog-like murkiness. But as an antidote, I combine that primal matter with a popish artificiality. I think to a large part the work is driven by an impulse to subvert the reading of the idealized "modern" elements via this sort of molten flow of ancient material.

DH An earthy antidote to hallucinogenic conventions—which usually tend to be effects of light: glinty, prismatic, and dematerialized.

SdB Well, as somebody once said in my studio: "You've got shit *and* God in these things." (LAUGHTER)

DH Isn't that Jesus in the painting right behind you? What's the title of that painting?

SdB No title!

DH He's wearing a new-age pendant and there's a helicopter blade sprouting from the top of his head but it strikes me as the most conventionally religious painting you've ever made.

SdB Yeah, maybe I would say that.

DH Are you Catholic?

SdB I grew up with a modest involvement in the Catholic church, I'm hardly negative about it. Maybe my references to spiritual orders have to do with growing up in a certain religious environment and the fact that I do have this Catholic aesthetic, in the sense of visual overload. But there is this other dimension that has to do with our belief in all kinds of things, whether it's UFOs—which, as I've always pointed out are *real* if only because we have a word for them. Much more interesting to me than believing in aliens is the fact that we are preoccupied with this phenomenon.

THE HUM OF EXISTENCE: TRY TO MOBILIZE!

DH Are you a little bit paranoid?

SdB No, not at all. (LAUGHTER)

DH There's something about faith, as you describe it—this belief in an invisible order—that harmonizes with a paranoid disposition. I ask this facetiously, but...

SdB But everybody's paranoid.

DH Sure, because there are hidden forces that might be arrayed against you.

SdB And what do people who debunk these things feel like they're gaining? The chaotic realm of the unknowable doesn't conform to scientific, calibrated information. As opposed to dismissing it all, I like to get a little messy and involved and try to mobilize...



Rotation and Ruin, 2006–07, oil on canvas, 54 × 69". Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Weinberg Gallery.

DH Is this where Terrence McKenna interests you, because he tells a story about the evolution of human consciousness?

SdB He discussed the possibility of prelinguistic man having ingested some naturally occurring hallucinogenic material, and that may have resulted in a catalyst for what we now consider consciousness as we know it. Reading this liberated me from the idea of art making as game playing with aesthetic issues.

DH Your work in the '80s dealt with optical abstraction. Then at some point, a whole flood of imagery and new ways of working poured in. Describe what happened.

SdB Well, it wasn't exactly overnight. The paintings you're referring to from the '80s were, to my mind, about nervous fields of energy. And they were less about opticality—even though that was a reasonable way of looking at them—than about fields of vibrations and information. To me they were about finding abstraction in the real world.

DH Were they an exercise in capricious subjectivity or an attempt to register a quality of experience?

SdB It was about finding an inventive way of painting what it felt like to be alive in an emerging technological world.

DH Like the hum of existence.

SdB Yeah, I used to kid around thinking, I'm painting what's inside Peter Halley's conduits. I always thought he was making cave paintings for the future. And I mean that as a compliment. Because Peter crystallized this portrait of what it was like to be a painter, an artist, aware of what our template was. And it's become bloody true.

DH It was a prospective retrospection.

SdB Exactly. But they're very primitive and clunky, even though they used to be the standard of ultra-coldness. Now, they look almost huggable (LAUGHTER) by certain new standards of nihilistic painting.

DH Who knew how deep the chill could get. Okay, you're in the buzz inside the circuitry of a Peter Halley painting, and what, that conduit opened up? It got broadband?

SdB The perfect system got corrupted. The linear components began to corrode and an absurd distort-

tion in the flow of energy emerged. I got preoccupied with the idea of meltdown. The paintings went from being these overlapping lines creating fields of energy to bleeding. Eventually they became these spilled paintings that I did in the early '90s—aluminum paint puddles with all this spray paint. They looked like toxic abstractions, which was actually what I wanted. I wanted abstraction to be a toxic experience. Yet I'd always resisted this idea of rendering.

DH Your new paintings are often a collision of the automatist (the spill, the accidental) and the depictive. So somewhere between the late '80s and early '90s, the hand and rendered depictions entered. Did it coincide with the collapse of the art market?

SdB No, I don't think so. It's funny you say that, because I've been at this almost twenty years, right? Publicly. It's shocking, but true. And I still feel like I'm just figuring out what I'm doing.

DH You and me both.

SdB But I always thought the economy was the same! (LAUGHTER) To me it's always been kind of good and kind of bad. I'm not indifferent to it, but I don't know, I just keep working.

DH We share this too.

SdB I don't know how to relate to the art economy, frankly. I was also caught up in this somewhat glamorous gallery situation that never felt comfortable. And yet, I was too starstruck to actually pull out. But of course I found out what I needed to by going through various phases. I was making paintings that were containers for whatever idiotic notion came into my head. And then that became untenable and uninteresting.

DH Are we talking about your show at Tony Shafrazi?

SdB Yeah. During the last show I had at Tony's, in '93, the best line I remember hearing was when the paintings were delivered to the gallery. There were like thirty of them and Tony looked at them and said, "This is the kind of work somebody makes before they get the electric chair." (LAUGHTER)

DH He's so inspired. I remember how disorienting your show was.

SdB That's what I wanted. Up to that point the paintings had to do with physical explorations of process. I had all this imagery hanging around my studio, some of which were cards from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I'd resisted putting in psychedelic information before, but it became time to start anchoring this stuff to something—in fact I remember talking about the mountain in *Close Encounters* functioning as a kind of tuning needle on a radio dial. An antidote to the state of constant searching.

DH If the earlier paintings were about the hum of consciousness, you wanted the later ones to embrace the content of consciousness.

SdB I don't give a shit about making perfect, or even functioning paintings. Around that time, I started to be more upfront about the things that I find really fascinating. People like McKenna, and his reference to the octopus as a chromatically morphological animal of outrageous dimension. He saw its changing colors as a form of visual communication that might be analogous to our evolving from prelinguistic interactions, to an almost telepathic language.

DH So in DiBenedetto world, the family resemblance of the octopus to the helicopter is based on a desire for transport—the helicopter is something designed



Disconnect, 2006, oil on linen, 50 x 62"; Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.

to take us from here to there while the octopus, in McKenna's dreamy scheme, symbolizes our power to convey thoughts from here to there.

SdB The helicopter was referred to in various articles I have sitting around here, for example, about Arthur M. Young, who invented the Bell 47—the famous bubble-headed helicopter in the Museum of Modern Art. Young had this crackpot side to him; he wanted to incorporate consciousness into the model of physics.

DH But he still was able to make objects that function.

SdB Yeah. He got a job at Bell Labs doing helicopter design as a way of pursuing his interest in the so-called Psychopter, which he was much more enthusiastic about than the helicopter.

DH What is the Psychopter?

SdB It's Young's idea of a vehicle that would transport the self—the human self—into another dimension. He really believed in this.

DH So this is outside of neuroscience or psychopharmacology. Are you talking about nuts-and-bolts engineering in the service of. . . altered consciousness?

SdB Exactly. He's in pursuit of something fantastic, but positioned within the world of utter practicality.

DH Well, as painters, we have permission to take questionable theories seriously.

SdB To what degree do you have to be *right*, as an artist? There is the notion that you should have some idea of what you're talking about, but it's never going to replace how interesting a work is.

DH The work needs to reflect the strength of our convictions. Our motivation thrives if we believe that our efforts matter.

SdB I have this belief that the work will yield awareness or trigger a connection to the images as if they're encoded in the paintings as bodies of information. It also becomes a way of escaping the issues around painting: nothing interests me less than the questions of abstraction, or the possibilities of whether painting can compete with other mediums. That seems to be really behind us.

DH This gets to the core question: What is painting good for?

SdB Well, like I mentioned with architecture, I don't like art that imitates other art—buildings that imitate sculpture, photographs that imitate paintings.

DH You're old school.

SdB I guess, but what is painting supposed to be? It's an inherently fictional place.

DH Yeah, part of its robust vitality, its ability to persist over so many centuries, is its adaptability. Painting has the shape-shifting ability to absorb other mediums, other aspirations.

SdB When I was in school in the '70s at Parsons, the idea of being, say, a portrait painter, someone like John Currin, seemed unthinkable. What would be the point?

DH If you wanted to be relevant and radical.

SdB And since then I've realized how much cool, bizarre painting was being done. Malcolm Morley is one of my heroes, his reckless attitude toward the need to make pictures. How do you find ways to make pictures of things? He let his sensibility go wherever it had to go, with an awareness of what art was supposed to be. And yet his total disregard for that.

DH When I think of his newest photo-related paintings, I feel an extreme distractedness at the micro level. He's doing the responsible job of copying the photo information but he wanders in vibrant ways only visible up close.

SdB That's Cézanne too, you see.

DH Well, that's you.

SdB Absolutely. I think I'm in the tradition of artists that like to use lots of incidental marks: Chuck Close, Philip Guston, Ensor, Morley, or even early Kusama, or early works by Carroll Dunham. It's a very compressed expressionism. Meticulous, yet agitated painting.

DH Are you describing something like voice, an involuntary chronicle of particular idiosyncrasy? I'm picturing a nervously manic behavior.

SdB I think it's just a way of being really honest about what it's like to have an arm and a hand and a brush in this most direct format.

DH I guess we're all instrumentalizing our pathologies. I love the mad beauty and collapsed time of standing before a handmade painting; the artist lifted his or her brush from the canvas to finish, perhaps hundreds of years ago, and we witness that moment from the same physical perspective. The time between when the paint dried and now is collapsed. Performance is built into the activity of painting.

SdB One of the great things about starting to render things in paintings was this weird reinforcement. These paintings feel as if I'm actually going to build them; am I suggesting this as a kind of building? The first thing I want to do is establish some *look* that may be endlessly confronted. Those buildings we see going out to Long Island, that horizontal, Javitsy convention-hall look. It's about trying to render one of those endless places, entropy world, like where they process taxes.

DH Your buildings are self-enclosed like space stations; they could exist on other planets.

SdB Part of me has this notion that ultimately, I'd like them to be simultaneously visionary, mundane, civic, and religious. That language, that syntax, has been used for almost every goddamned purpose; the Crystal Cathedral for example, that place really interests me. Philip Johnson built it, and Richard Meyer did this crazy tower.

DH It's an important stop on the way to Disneyland.

SdB Which was our next stop. Precisely. But what's up with this New-Age-meets-Christianity thing? It's kind of wild. [Read More: DiBenedetto on a question of faith on www.bombsite.com.](#)