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Attack of the Cephalopods



*Steve DiBenedetto: Chaostrophy, 2005, oil on linen, 72 by 120 inches.
All photos this article courtesy Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York.*

Hallucinatory battles between monstrous octopi and whirring helicopters fill Steve DiBenedetto's intensely worked paintings and drawings.

BY MATTHEW GUY NICHOLS

Unbeknownst to many, Steve DiBenedetto has been exhibiting his work since 1987, when his first solo show was mounted at New York's Cable Gallery. But his profile has risen considerably in the past five years as critics, curators and the art world at large have warmed to his densely congested paintings and drawings, which indulge an esthetic of overstimulation.

When discussing the kaleidoscopic clutter of DiBenedetto's work, a remarkable number of writers have invoked psychotropic drugs and altered states of consciousness. His art has been described as "hypnotic," "mind-bending" and "evocative of drug-induced hallucinations." The artist himself has been likened to an "obsessive madman" with a "history of psychedelic drug consumption" who may be "losing his grip." While such appreciations of his earlier work may be apt, and DiBenedetto clearly continues to plumb deep reservoirs of imagination, his recent show at Nolan/Eckman Gallery in SoHo did not necessarily offer escape into a world of pure fantasy. Indeed, many of the 15 paintings and drawings on display seemed to resonate with the grim reality of current events.

A psychedelic reading of DiBenedetto's work partially derives from his expansive palette, which includes liberal doses of intense, jewel-like color. More often than not, his radiant pigments are laid down in discordant combinations that assault the eye with optical vibrations. DiBenedetto's imagery is also quite trippy. Since around 2000 he has settled upon a few recurring motifs, which reliably include octopi, helicopters, Ferris wheels and carousels. These ostensibly unrelated objects are juxtaposed throughout his works, creating weird narratives that seem to emerge from dreams.

But DiBenedetto's principal motifs are clearly related on a formal level. They all possess radial elements that spread outward from a centralized core. In *Oztopus* (2004-05), for example, one of two small colored pencil drawings in this show, the impossibly long arms of a lumpy gray octopus taper and twist as they snake away from the body, eventually filling most of the drawing with intricate braided designs. In *Deliverance* (2003), three centrifugal rhythms coexist on the same sheet of paper. While the pink and orange spokes of a



Oztopus, 2004-05, colored pencil on paper, 29 1/2 by 22 1/2 inches.

luminous Ferris wheel dominate the lower half of this drawing, the spinning blades of two helicopters whip an aquamarine sky into moiré patterns.

Because they ultimately translate volumetric forms into two-dimensional filigree, DiBenedetto's finely wrought colored pencil drawings are often compared to the interlacing illumination of medieval manuscripts. Most of the drawings in this show, however, forsake both color and continuous pattern for a looser, more skeletal treatment of the artist's trademark subjects. In four such drawings the helicopters and Ferris wheel reappear, but are now rendered with short, discrete strokes of charcoal on white paper. Titles like *Hover & Crash* and *Disintegration* (both 2005) describe scenes of disaster, wherein the choppers collide with the carnival rides in showers of splintered and twisted metal. In this newer suite of drawings, DiBenedetto seems to dramatize the theoretical limits of his radial motifs; all forms of outward expansion will eventually meet a countervailing force.

This theme carries over into DiBenedetto's new oil paintings, five of which were featured in this show. While the Ferris wheel makes a marginal appearance in some of these canvases, the main protagonists are octopi and helicopters, and they repeatedly clash like mortal enemies. In *Captured Shadow* (2005), for example, low-flying helicopters appear to menace an enormous, landlubbing octopus. Responding with whiplash tentacles, this fish out

Rather than offering an escape into the world of fantasy, DiBenedetto's recent work resonates with the grim reality of current events in Iraq.

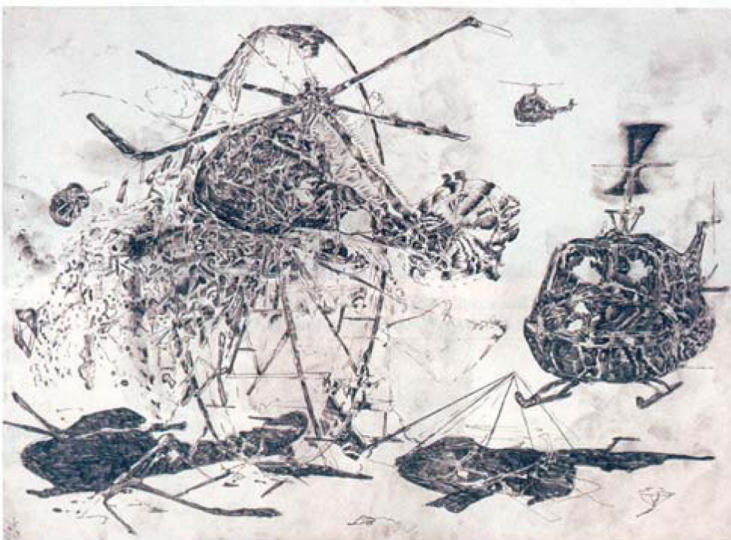
of water drags one of the helicopters to the ground, where it crumples into a charred, black mass.

By repeating this essential struggle in painting after painting, DiBenedetto invokes a number of binary oppositions. The earthbound is contrasted to the airborne. Man confronts beast. Technology challenges the organic rhythms of Mother Nature. These dualities are usually underscored by DiBenedetto's mixed bag of painting techniques, which can vary widely across a given canvas. In *Captured Shadow* the airborne helicopters are scraped down to thin, olive-green silhouettes and their whirling propellers slice the sky into geometric facets of pastel color. Down below, the octopus is all amorphous impasto, its thickly swirled skin of orange, gold and brown paint threatening the image's very legibility.

I also noticed a single palm tree in this painting, in the left background. It grows from a sandy beige ground to suggest a desert stage for this epic battle. More telling, perhaps, are the architectural elements subsumed in *Chaostrophy* (2005), a 6-by-10-foot canvas that is densely packed with clashing colors, competing patterns and occasional passages of painterly abstraction. What appear to be Islamic minarets emerge from the center of this exercise in horror vacui, separating another giant octopus from an exploding helicopter, the tail of which is caught in the animal's sinuous grip. Once detected, details such as the palm tree and the minarets endow some of DiBenedetto's new paintings with geographic specificity and bring to mind the ongoing conflict in Iraq.

As previously mentioned, octopi and helicopters have routinely appeared in DiBenedetto's work since at least 2000, years before the Iraq War became a hotly debated backdrop to our everyday lives. But no image can possess a single, fixed meaning, and will accumulate or shed significance as its referential context fluctuates. So while DiBenedetto originally based his helicopter imagery on the Bell Model 47, an aircraft designed by Arthur M. Young in 1946, his silhou-

Hover & Crash, 2005, charcoal pencil on paper, 19 1/2 by 27 1/2 inches.





Captured Shadow, 2005, oil on linen, 48 by 60 inches.

itted choppers nonetheless speak to our greater familiarity with Black Hawks and Chinooks of more recent vintage.

The iconography of the octopi can also be read through the lens of current events. In nature these animals are famously mutable. Not only can they regenerate amputated arms, but they can also change the color of their skins to blend in with their surroundings. DiBenedetto nods to this phenomenon by painting his cephalopods in a wide spectrum of browns, oranges, reds and blues. When pitted against his predatory aircraft, DiBenedetto's octopi may well function as zoomorphic emblems of the forces that thwart the American occupation of Iraq. Like the so-called insurgency in that country, his multi-limbed, shape-shifting sea creatures embody elusiveness, resilience and cunning decentralization. If this seems like an interpretive stretch, so to speak, one might consider the longstanding tradition of B-movie monsters that manifest cultural Otherness. Indeed, DiBenedetto's octopi seem to channel *The Blob*, the 1958 cult classic that sublimated Cold

War fears of communism through an equally nebulous and intractable enemy.

All this is not to say that DiBenedetto has suddenly morphed into a social realist painter. His work continues to dazzle the eye with restless compositions of vivid color, intricate pattern and variegated brushwork. His subject matter also remains defiantly idiosyncratic, always requiring a substantial suspension of disbelief. But as we grow accustomed to the bizarre visual trips that DiBenedetto keeps sending us on, we may start to discover a very fine line between hallucination and sobriety. □

Steve DiBenedetto's recent paintings and drawings were on view at Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York [Oct. 29-Dec. 3, 2005]. A catalogue with an essay by Klaus Kertess accompanied the exhibition.

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