

DAVID NOLAN NEW YORK

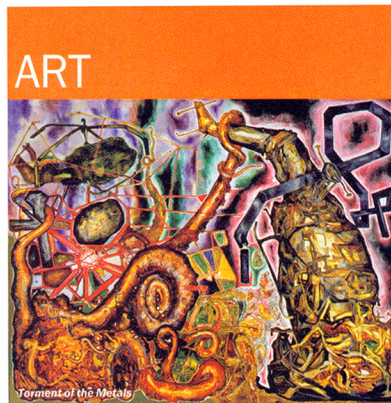
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Alchemical reaction

Steve DiBenedetto bends the mind but not tradition at Nolan/Eckman

By Andrea K. Scott

In a hallucinatory catalog essay co-written in 1966 by Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, an extraterrestrial comments on a canvas by the engineer of his spaceship: "I'm glad you're conventional, with no qualms about painting beautiful pictures. You have as much in common with Raphael as with the Surrealists, the Impressionists, the cave painters." This quote uncannily doubles as a description of Steve DiBenedetto's mind-altering paintings and drawings. *Conventional* may not be the first word that comes to mind while viewing his current show at Nolan/Eckman Gallery: In many of the compositions, octopuses can be seen tangling with helicopters in settings that are by turns murky and lapidary. But the conventions of painting are among the main subjects of this belligerently beautiful work.

In the show's 15 drawings and paintings you can detect the lofty architectural interiors of Raphael (see his *School of Athens*), the mottled surfaces and apocalyptic landscapes of Surrealist Max Ernst, traces of Richter's shimmering abstract smears and more than a hint of Polke's obsession with alchemy. You can even spot

the occasional UFO.

DiBenedetto made his debut in 1987 at Soho's Cable Gallery, which was run by Nicole Klagsbrun (now a Chelsea gallerist) and Clarissa Dalrymple (now a taste maker with a knack for tagging fresh talent). While DiBenedetto has never been off the art-world radar, his work is enjoying a well-deserved surge in popularity these days, thanks to the curatorial craze for "invented worlds" in contemporary painting,

Review

Steve DiBenedetto
Nolan/Eckman Gallery, through
Sat 3 (see Soho).

evidenced by the current "Painted World" at P.S. 1 and last summer's Whitney survey, "Remote Viewing," which included DiBenedetto's work. (Note to curators: All artists imagine worlds; it's part of the job.)

While DiBenedetto bends the mind with shapeshifting imagery—those aforementioned aircraft and cephalopods shudder and ooze into intricately patterned abstractions—he never alters the shape of the canvas itself. Unlike some of his contemporaries

(Carroll Dunham, for example), he sticks to the traditional four-cornered format. This isn't to say DiBenedetto is engaged in some Greenbergian endgame. A better analogy for his work can be found in the pages of *Finnegan's Wake*, where James Joyce writes, "I'm working on a machine with only one wheel... The wheel is a square." Wheels turn the square machinery of painting throughout this show; whirling discs appear in nearly every painting and drawing. The squared circle is also a central motif in the "divine geometry" of alchemy, a lexicon that DiBenedetto draws on frequently, borrowing not its only mystical imagery, but titles like *Torment of the Metals*, in which an octopus's tentacle ensnares a helicopter whose metal form has devolved into a tangle of viscera.

Where Polke played alchemist in the 1980s—in a series of works that changed color depending on the temperature of the room, thanks to heat-sensitive paint—DiBenedetto captures climactic shifts using straightforward oil. In *Re-Entry*, a churning miasma of pale-blue brush strokes floods the lower-left edge of the picture plane, weaving its way through a molten field of red and yellow. The image suggests *prima materia*, the cosmic matter that alchemists believed was the source of all existence, in which apparently incompatible opposites were guided from conflict to harmony.

The show's battling titans—helicopter and octopus—invoke a similarly symbiotic set of oppositions: technology and nature, rigid and fluid, man and beast. Fans of DiBenedetto's work may know that the copter was inspired in part by the movie *Apocalypse Now* (the clue is the title of an earlier work, not on view at Nolan/Eckman). But anyone who's clocked in frequent-flier miles at MoMA may also think of passing the museum's famed green whirlybird on the way to worship at the temple of modern painting. (Other likely associations include the aircraft that routinely hover above the city's skyline since 9/11 and military aircraft deployed in Iraq.)

And the octopus? In nature it communicates by changing the color, the texture and even the shape of its skin. Think of it as a stand-in for the medium it is made of—a slippery symbol of the transformative, *prima materia* of paint itself. ■