We are delighted to have the opportunity to present Steve DiBenedetto: *Edge Dwelling*, an exhibition that has been eagerly awaited since Steve lectured here two years ago at the invitation of graduate students in the Art Department. The exhibition includes early works as well as some of his most recent paintings and drawings, all incorporating the idiosyncratic motifs and subject matter for which Steve is best known.

These exceptional works have come to us from many lenders, and I am indebted to them for their cooperation and generosity. Without their support the exhibition would not have been possible. David Nolan Gallery has generously helped to underwrite this publication. David Nolan and Katherine Chan have been encouraging and helpful to our efforts throughout the process of organizing the exhibition and preparing for the publication in every possible way.

I am grateful to University at Albany Interim President George M. Philip and Interim Provost Susan D. Phillips for their ongoing support of the museum and its programs. Special thanks to William B. Hedberg, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, for his thoughtful guidance throughout this year and every year. We are grateful to University Auxiliary Services, which has been generous in its support of this and many other museum projects.
Ken Johnson’s reflections are illuminating; I am reminded again of how fortunate we are as a discipline to have the benefit of his insights and intellectual rigor. We are grateful to Matt Tiernan for his enthusiasm and for curatorial assistance in organizing the exhibition. Geoffrey Young has lent his inimitable passion to the project from the outset. Thanks go to Debi Sonzogni for helping with loans from the A.G. Rosen collection.

Organizing an exhibition is always an interesting journey, and as is often the case, one’s companions define the trip. To the many tasks at hand the museum staff has brought resourcefulness, hard work, and exacting standards. I am grateful to them all: Corinna Ripps Schaming, Zheng Hu, Naomi Lewis, Jeffrey Wright-Sedam, Darcie Ab-batiello, Wren Panzella, Ryan Parr, Joanne Lue, and Patricia VanAlstyne.

With every exhibition, the work defines the project and sustains our efforts, giving the entire venture meaning and significance. If it has been something of an edge walk, it is because that is where the work resides. Steve DiBenedetto is an artist who puts it on that dangerous edge—at every outing. There is a rawness here that evokes the kind of reckless courage needed to mine this territory. Expect to be disoriented, disturbed, and taken to a place where an uneasy, structured chaos holds sway. Here on the edge, the energy is dizzying, the conversations free-wheeling, and the work absorbing; and for this traveler, the journey has been its own reward. I am deeply grateful to Steve for his generosity, his patience, but mostly for his work. For in the end, it is always about the work.

Shift on Red, 2000
Oil on linen
12 x 14 inches
Collection of A. G. Rosen

Oasisopolis, 1999
Oil on linen
10 ¾ x 13 ¾ inches
Collection of A. G. Rosen
How far can you push a painting in opposite directions and still have it hang together? How far a mind? Oscillating wildly between surface and depth, abstraction and figuration, darkness and light, order and chaos, and sanity and craziness, Steve DiBenedetto’s paintings test the limits of what a painting can contain.

At first DiBenedetto’s paintings may seem visually and cognitively dissonant. They project a harsh and confusing, yet bracing ugliness, like the music of a noise band. Here paint is smeared thinly in strident colors; there it is brushed on in thick, muddy impastos or cake-frosting-like highlights. In some areas paint is worked up into crusty passages of opalescent luminosity; in other areas it may be hastily dashed on over acidic underlayers.

In recent gouache paintings on frosty plastic sheets, the paint pools irregularly, and there is a watery translucency. At the same time the paint seems dry and scabby, the colors dirty or garish while exuding a lunar inner light. The graphically vivid colored pencil drawings made from myriad neatly applied strokes suggest states of psychedelic madness.

Because the aggressive opticality of DiBenedetto’s works tends to collapse figure into ground, producing a flattened, tapestry-like effect, it is sometimes hard to tell what
the paintings represent. With some study you see that they are like illustrations for a science fiction monster movie in which a giant beast from aquatic depths threatens to destroy modern civilization. Octopuses attack buildings, grab helicopters out of the sky, destroy Ferris wheels.

The hallucinatory, apocalyptic violence of DiBenedetto’s imagery matches the violence of the paint and the full-frontal attack of the picture as a whole, generating a combustive synergy of form, paint, and imagery. The effect is paradoxical: By going against the grain of conventional taste in so many ways, DiBenedetto achieves an intense, all-over beauty.

Like figures in a recurring dream or nightmare, three dramatis personae appear again and again in DiBenedetto’s paintings: the octopus, the helicopter, and the glass tower. They embody the basic energies driving his art.

The Octopus

The octopus lives in the sea. It has a big head, no body, and eight arms equipped with grabby suction cups. Lacking a skeleton, it moves in organic, flowing rhythms, and it is drawn to dark cavities where it hides and waits for unwary prey.

If we think of the sea as the psyche’s unknown depths—the unconscious—then the octopus might personify intuition: that mental faculty that accesses what we know deep down inside but don’t know we know. The octopus takes us to the mind’s submarine places, realms unlit by
the dry rational daylight of diurnal consciousness. With its prehensile arms, it reaches into remote crevices and latches onto our hidden fantasies.

Another interesting characteristic of the octopus is its ability to change the color of its skin. The most intelligent of all invertebrates, it can camouflage itself to hide from predators, and, by changing colors, it can communicate with and warn other octopuses. So the octopus is like a painting whose visible skin manifests otherwise invisible, inner states of feeling.

Why is the octopus in DiBenedetto’s paintings often so scary? Because it has fed on energies that were diverted into the unconscious—all those feelings of desire, greed, aggression, rage, fear, embarrassment, and hate that normal, well-behaved people keep to themselves and try not to think about. Exiled for centuries by an Enlightenment culture of science and reason that distrusts intuitive feeling and visionary imagination, the octopusian soul has been lurking in the deep, stewing in those corrosive psychic juices.

The Glass Tower

The glass tower is everything that the octopus is not. It is an inorganic structure with a rigid, grided skeleton and a hard, shiny outer shell. It is the epitome of constructive logic. While its exterior reveals its interior order, its reflective skin masks inner feeling. In its ascension to empyrean heights, the skyscraper represents overweening intellectual and spiritual ambition—a determination to rise above it all, to achieve a coolly disinterested, distant, yet penetrating, God-like perspective.

You could say that by featuring skyscrapers in his new paintings, DiBenedetto means to critique those sterile,
crystalline structures as embodiments of hubris—towers of Babel, citadels of corporate globalism. But that would overlook something else they suggest about DiBenedetto’s aspirations. His paintings are highly intellectual constructions that toy ingeniously with languages of Modernist art: Expressionism, Surrealism, Cubism, and Constructivism are all in play. The glass tower of formalist ingenuity is as much a piece of his creative psyche as the octopus of intuitive fantasy.

The glass towers in DiBenedetto’s paintings are not cool. They’re alive; they’re electrified, they glow, they vibrate. Bridging the gap between earth and sky, they’re bursting with energy. They are ecstatic or they are overheated and headed toward meltdown. They’re on the verge of a revelatory transformation or some great catastrophe.

The Helicopter

DiBenedetto has said that the helicopter in his paintings was inspired by a particular model—the Bell-47. It was the first helicopter in America licensed for civilian use. A beautiful green one hangs like a giant dragonfly over the grand stairway to the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The chief designer of the Bell-47 was Arthur M. Young (1905–1995), a mathematician and inventor who, after finishing his work on the helicopter in 1947, went on to pursue research in the elevation and expansion of consciousness. He thought that the technological know-how that could produce helicopters could yield similarly evolutionary results in the spiritual realm. He created an organization
called the Foundation for the Study of Consciousness to advance his goals.

So the helicopter represents at least two other aspects of the artist. There is the artist as aerial adventurer, able to leave the flat earth of conventional wisdom and fly off to new celestial frontiers. And there is the artist as inventor of machines—i.e., artworks—for elevating consciousness. (Buckminster Fuller is an example of the helicopter-type artist.)

**They Might Be Gendered**

In many of DiBenedetto’s paintings, helicopters are dragged back down to earth by giant octopuses. Octopuses and helicopters are not necessarily mortal enemies, but they are mirror opposites. With its whirling blades, the helicopter is all centrifugal energy—it is driven to fly out, up, and away. It runs the risk of losing touch with the centered, terrestrial consciousness. (The recurring images of amusement park Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds in DiBenedetto’s paintings also reflect the spinning, constantly expanding, un-grounded dynamism of industrialized modernity.)

Fortunately, albeit sometimes disastrously, another part of the psyche—the octopus with its many arms reaching out and pulling inward in all directions—works to draw things toward the center and down to earth into an organic integration.

In this light, the glass tower has a different aspect. It rises into the air, but unlike the helicopter, it is rooted in the ground. It connects instinct and intellect. Buildings in some recent paintings are half glass and half made of some mossy, organic green stuff, suggesting an urge to integrate nature and culture.

What, then, about the relationship between the octopus and the glass tower? If the building is a phallic symbol, an embodiment of ascendant, masculine power, what does that make the octopus? Could it be a vaginal symbol of all-embracing, organic, and sensual envelopment? If the helicopter is a vehicle of boyish, outward-bound adventure, is...
the octopus a symbol of maternal containment? Such psychoanalytic interpretations may sound crude, but to deny the play of conventionally gendered associations and polymorphous sexual energies in DiBenedetto’s paintings would be to miss much of what gives them their powerful psychic resonance.

**Coniunctio Oppositorum**

The alchemists of Medieval and Renaissance times conceived of their investigations into the properties and possibilities of elemental substances in allegorical terms. They saw their work as a process of spiritual advancement culminating ideally in a cosmic wedding of opposites—the coniunctio oppositorum—traditionally realized in images of sexual intercourse between the King and the Queen or the Sun and the Moon.

In one of the loveliest of DiBenedetto’s recent gouaches, *Octopus & Building*, from 2008, a great, golden brown octopus lies in a heap at the base of a sleek, soaring tower of icy blue glass as the sun glows in a mottled, pea soup-green sky. It is a surprisingly peaceful and even loving image—a modern conjunctio.

Mostly, however, what you find in DiBenedetto’s paintings is not conflict resolution. On the contrary, the beauty of his work lies in its constant turmoil. Often on the brink of going to pieces, the paintings viscerally reflect the never-ending dynamic of love and war between opposites that is psychic life. A DiBenedetto painting is a picture of the mind in crisis, exquisitely and excruciatingly alive to all its possibilities.

Ken Johnson is a freelance critic who lives in Flushing, New York. He writes regularly for *The New York Times* and is a contributing editor for *Art in America* magazine.

*Edge Dwelling*, 2008
Oil on canvas
96 x 74 ½ inches
Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York
Divest, 1998
Oil on canvas
73 x 91 inches
Collection of Jeff Bailey

Untitled, 1997
Charcoal on paper
22 ½ x 30 inches
Collection of A. G. Rosen

Untitled (Octopus), 1998
Charcoal pencil on paper
22 x 29 ½ inches
Collection of Klaus Kertess
Octotech, 2007
Oil on linen
69 x 75 inches
Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York

Fester, 1999
Oil on linen
18 x 23 7/8 inches
Collection of A. G. Rosen
Clogierhyme, 2008
Gouache and watercolor on polypropylene
40 x 26 inches
Collection of Morris Orden

Untitled, 2008
Gouache and watercolor on polypropylene
40 x 26 inches
Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York
Caso Amnesia, 2008
Oil on canvas
54 ¼ x 72 inches
Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York
### Exhibition Checklist

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<td><strong>Casa Amnesia</strong>, 2008</td>
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Biography

Born 1958 in Bronx, New York
1980 BFA, Parsons School of Design, New York, NY

Awards, Distinctions, Fellowships
2003 Rosenthal Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters
2002 Guggenheim Fellowship Award
2001 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award
1999 Residency at Foundation Claude Monet, Giverny, France

Individual Exhibitions
2008 Steve DiBenedetto: Edge Dwelling, University Art Museum, University at Albany, Albany, NY
2004 Steve DiBenedetto: Semi(op)topics, MassArt, Boston, MA
2003 David Nolan Gallery, New York, NY
2002 Galerie Pierre Huber, Geneva, Switzerland
2001 Joseph Fischman, Gallery G, New York, NY
1999 Reali Arte Contemporanea, Sarnico, Italy
1998 Air & Public, Geneva, Switzerland
1997 Art & Public, Geneva, Switzerland
1995 Marella Arte Contemporanea, Sarnico, Italy
1993 Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY
1988 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, NY
1987 Cable Gallery, New York, NY
1986 Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York, NY (with Matthew Kranzl)
1985 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, NY
1984 Galerie Rolf Ricke, Köln, Germany
1983 Period Gallery, Frankfurt, Germany
1982 Catlin Gallery, New York, NY
1981 Galerie Claire Buren, Paris, France
1980 BFA, Parsons School of Design, New York, NY

Group Exhibitions
2005 The Art of the Real, Galerie Pierre Huber, Geneva, Switzerland
2004 BFA, Parsons School of Design, New York, NY
2003 Invitational Exhibition, The American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
2002 Steve DiBenedetto, Spitzer Sculpture, Joe Zucker, Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York, NY
2001 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, NY
1999 Einjach Kuest, Sammlung Rolf Ricke, Neues Museum, Nürnberg Germany
1998 Post-Hypnotic, University Galleries, Normal, IL
1996 Disfunction USA, Dernière Station Avant l’Autoroute, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
1995 Reaì Arte Contemporanea, Brescia, Italy
1993 La Bamba, Comité pour l’Art, Paris, France
1991 Steve DiBenedetto, Baumgartner Gallery, New York, NY
1990 Slow Art, FICP, 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY
1989 The Painted Desert, Galerie Letizia Battaglia, Paris, France
1988 Evening Delights, MassArt, Boston, MA
1987 A Drawing Show, Cable Gallery, New York, NY
1986 What’s Wrong With This Picture, Postmasters Gallery, New York, NY
1985-86 The Kitchen, New York, NY
1984 What’s Wrong With This Picture, Gallery G, New York, NY
1983 Climate of Site, Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
1982 What’s Wrong With This Picture, Postmasters Gallery, New York, NY
1981 Potpourri, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, OR
1979 Sherry Milliken, The Art of the Real, Hermitage Gallery, New York, NY
1978 The Painted Desert, Galerie Letizia Battaglia, Paris, France
1977 Art Against AIDS, Gaitt, Preis von Europa, Brussels, Belgium
1976 The Painted Desert, Galerie Letizia Battaglia, Paris, France
1975 What’s Wrong With This Picture, FICP, 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY
1974 Hot Pics/84, Kunstverein Museum Schloss, Marburg, Germany
1973 What’s Wrong With This Picture, Postmasters Gallery, New York, NY
1972 The Painted Desert, Galerie Letizia Battaglia, Paris, France
1971 Climate of Site, Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
1970 What’s Wrong With This Picture, Postmasters Gallery, New York, NY

Collections
2008 Disarming Matter, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, Collection of Gal Monaghan