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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Amid the swirl of strokes, a respite

Steve DiBenedetto makes nettlesome, stick-in-your-craw paintings. At Daniel Weinberg Gallery, the New Yorker's pictures of helicopters, octopuses, giant crystals and ruined buildings have the presence of ominous premonitions — unverifiable claims about the future that can neither be believed nor dismissed but assail the rational mind with their eerie resemblance to the present. It's easily botched territory, and DiBenedetto handles it with aplomb.

He turns the mysteriousness of what he depicts into fertile ground for painterly dexterity that is meaty and sophisticated, a little scary but never crude or melodramatic. The recognizable objects in DiBenedetto's paintings do not hold the compositions together, like things in Realist pictures. Nor do they strive for the shock of Surrealism, using unexpected juxtapositions to jump-start a viewer's deadened awareness. Instead, they provide momentary visual respite — rest stops for busy eyeballs — amid the swirling stew of brush strokes, stabs and scrapes.

The dense, vigorously worked surfaces of DiBenedetto's paintings look as if they have been to hell and back — and enjoyed the trip. Picture planes splinter into jagged fragments. Some are dry and crusty, like coagulated organic matter. Others are loose and fluid, like oil spills. Still others seem to be melting, like molten lava, and emitting gaseous hallucinations.

Think Malcolm Morley meets Jasper Johns, by way of Jules Verne and "Apocalypse Now." The ghosts of Madame Blavatsky and Forrest Bess also haunt DiBenedetto's paintings. It's a trippy, brain-bending mixture, just the stuff for an artist intoxicated by paint's shape-shifting, time-traveling magic.

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, 6148 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 954-8425. Through April 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays.