HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS • WEEKEND

What Do Artists Need to Make Their Work?

For artists and writers, self-isolation means doing what they have always done — which is work at home.

John Yau April 18, 2020

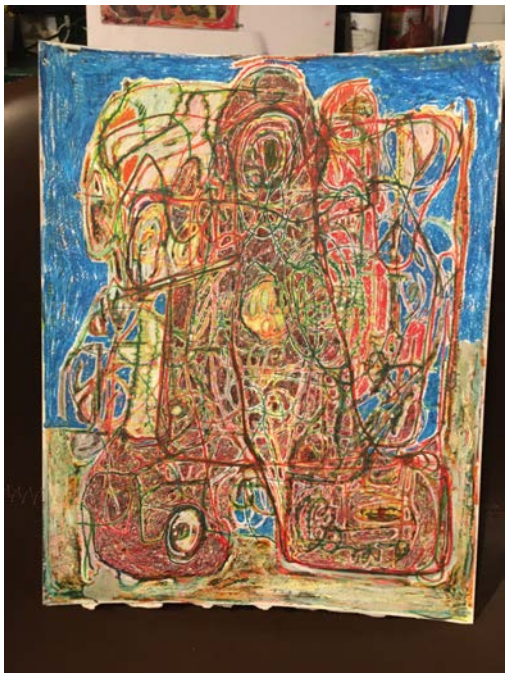
Steve DiBenedetto, "Issues" (2020), oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches (all images courtesy the artist)

The first artist I ever met was John Way (1921–2012) in 1957. He and his wife and son had immigrated to Boston from Hong Kong in 1956. I met his son Douglas, who was a few years older than me, at school. Soon, my parents became friends with his, largely because they had all lived in Shanghai and spoke the dialect particular to that city. While all of them spoke English, they also happily conversed in a language that no one else they knew or met could understand.

Way, who was an abstract artist, studied engineering at the Massachusetts of Technology. In the evenings and on the weekends, he painted in the living room of the small Beacon Hill

tenement apartment he shared with his family, and talked to anyone who would listen about the paintings of Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Zao Wou-ki. In 1965, while I was in high school, Way's abstract paintings were included with work by Helen Frankenthaler, Hans Hartung, Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol in the exhibition, *Painter without a Brush*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

Because of Way, my first image of an artist was that of someone who worked in an apartment. Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought this image back to me. While the pandemic has forced local government to institute social distancing, and many business have instructed their employees to work remotely, for other types of workers, such as artists and writers, self-isolation means doing what they have always done — which is work at home.



Steve DiBenedetto, "Human Maze" (2020), colored pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches

On December 31, 2019, Steve DiBenedetto had to move out of his studio in Long Island City. I hadn't thought about this change in his life until recently, when I sent him an email asking how he and his wife, the sculptor Michele Segre, and their teenage son, Lucio, were faring under lockdown. One reason I hadn't thought about DiBenedetto's changed circumstances is that he didn't talk about it in the months before it happened: he knew he would have to move out and he was ready to work at home.

The Covid-19 pandemic tightened DiBenedeto's situation but did not fundamentally alter it. However, Segre, has a studio in the Bronx, but she, too, was working from home because she didn't want to ride the subway to her studio, and it would take an hour by bike.

There you have it: a painter and a sculptor and their teenage son (he just celebrated his 16th birthday in lockdown) living and working in an

apartment they seldom leave. They have no studio assistants or fabricators. They are, and always have been, DIY, a possibility the corporate art world seems to have lost in its celebration of the big and the fabricated.

Steve DiBenedetto, "Implication" (2020), colored pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches

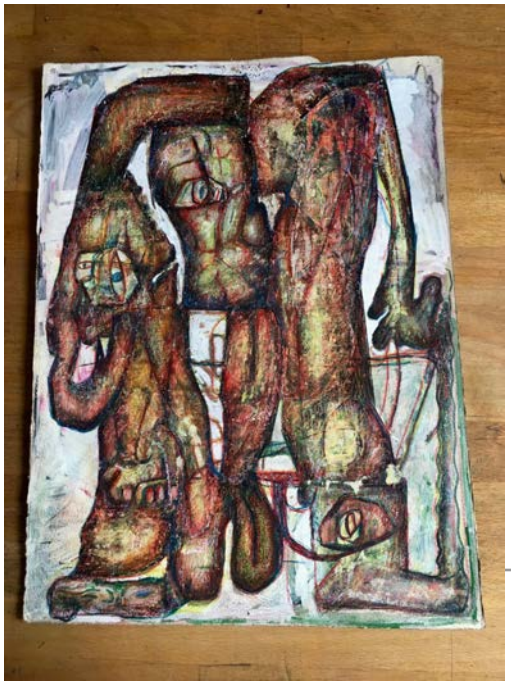
It is ironic to hear critics complaining about this very corporatization, and then read articles by those same writers promoting artists known for manufacturing their brand in various colors and sizes, from public monuments to fancy handbags. Under this model, the artist runs a "studio" whose sole purpose is to market and sell things. If the assistants and fabricators can't produce them, the artist has nothing to sell, except last year's leftover stock. The goal is to be financially successful and ubiquitous.

I like that DiBenedetto and Segre are not interested in being omnipresent, but that is not why I began writing about their work more than 10 years ago, or why I have followed their work as best as I could ever since.

Their newly confined circumstances in the face of the pandemic raises a question that seems particularly relevant in the current situation: what do you need to make your work?

DiBenedetto seems to need pencils, crayons, paper, and a smooth surface to work on. Everything is portable, in case he has to move his studio and set up elsewhere. It is the opposite of the Warhol Factory model, which the media and other institutions have been glorifying since the mid-1960s.

That model is about the illusion of stability and continued economic growth, envisioning a permanent upward trajectory that would ensure the uninterrupted production of art. It is the unreflective celebration of the neoliberal model of capitalism.



Steve DiBenedetto, “Conceptual Drawing” (2020), colored pencil on paper, 14 7/8 x 11 1/8 inches

If we instead took Paul Klee’s dictum (“A drawing is simply a line going for a walk.”) as a measure, we might begin to think about the simple act of drawing and celebrate artists for taking us on walks that are extensive, experimental, and far-ranging.

In 2008, I made this observation about DiBenedetto:

> Crisis, change, and destruction are at the core of DiBenedetto’s concerns, and, to his credit, he never permits them to descend into clichés. His viewpoints are deliberately distorted, offbeat and even grating. He tries to maintain the view of a witness, rather than a judge.

Steve DiBenedetto, “Crust” (2020), oil on linen, 19 x 14 inches

Despite all the changes DiBenedetto’s work has undergone since he first gained widespread attention as one of eight artists included in the exhibition, *REMOTE VIEWING (INVENTED WORLDS IN RECENT PAINTING AND DRAWING)* at the Whitney Museum of American Art (June 2-October 23, 2005), the human body continues to be one of his enduring subjects, as both lump and lumpenproletariat.

In DiBenedetto’s drawings, lines encircle a sheet of paper, with other lines starting and stopping until an

enclosed shape emerges, subdivided into different-sized areas or, biologically speaking, vacuoles. We are likely to see almond- or eye-shaped areas peering out of the entangled lines and vacuoles, each of which has been filled with a color.

The emergent shape is flat, somewhere between skin, façade, body, and map. Another altogether different element might be added to composition, such as lines radiating from inside the form to the paper's edge, and going all the way around the composition. Or he might make a drawing with overtly figurative elements and mix in abstract lines and shapes. DiBenedetto is always drawing a material form, and his works are never purely abstract.

Steve DiBenedetto, "Unfinished Building" (2020), colored pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches

In some cases, it looks as if DiBenedetto has done one drawing on top of another or, to put it another way, added one vocabulary (geometric) to another (organic). The joining of these two vocabularies evokes the porous interface between humans and prosthetic devices, and between the fleshly and digital worlds. It has become a legitimate question to ask, where do our bodies begin and end? What have they become?

Following this line of thought, how many circuitries do we inhabit, and how many dwell in us? While this may not be an overt subject in DiBenedetto's work, it is nevertheless there to be to be seen and reflected upon, as he melds together aspects of science fiction and figurative expressionism, the visionary and the biological, not unlike the aftermath of radiation upon the all-too-forgiving earth. With their heads and bodies mashed together, his figures are the lumpenproletariat descendants of the octopi that he depicted in his earlier work.

I like that DiBenedetto seems to start each drawing from scratch.

Steve DiBenedetto, "Plan" (2020), colored pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches

While critics have pointed out – both favorably and unfavorably – that DiBenedetto's figures are inspired (or overly influenced) by Jean Dubuffet, it seems to me that the real point should be to discern what differs the former's creatures from the latter's. Unlike Dubuffet's more-or-less anatomically correct figures, DiBenedetto's are misshapen; their eyes (or eye) might be located in the region of the belly button or groin. They might have legs but usually no head, which they don't seem to need. They are funny and unsettling.

DiBenedetto has fused the grotesquely misshapen caricatures drawn by the madcap cartoonist Basil Wolverton with the dark moral vision of Nathaniel Hawthorne; his figures seem simultaneously weirdly comic and irredeemably tormented, incapable of insight or attaining a higher consciousness. Whereas Dubuffet's figures are sophisticated, if comical, urban dwellers, DiBenedetto's slobs can be found anywhere in America, happily arrogant in their ignorance.

Is their torment a consequence of their environment, or were they born with it and bear it like an indelible stain, as some religions believe? DiBenedetto's vision strikes me as particularly resonant with our current calamity.

Note: *At a later date, I will write about Michelle Segre and the work she is making while under lockdown.*