

4 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

David Byrd's hospital paintings; Cory Arcangel's video game installations; Lucas Blalock's disquieting still-life images; and Hugh Steers' portraits during the AIDS crisis.

By Roberta Smith, Holland Cotter, Jillian Steinhauer and Will Heinrich

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Hugh Steers

Through April 3. Alexander Gray Associates, 510 West 26th Street, Manhattan, (212) 399-2636,alexandergray.com.



Hugh Steers' "Crow" (1988) in the show
"Strange State of Being." Estate of Hugh Steers
and Alexander Gray Associates

When the artist Hugh Steers, just out of Yale, was doing realist figurative painting in the mid-1980s, that genre, so hot right now, was out of fashion. His earliest pictures, of gay-themed allegorical narratives, felt like art in search of an era.

In 1987, Steers tested H.I.V. positive. Thereafter the style of his work — a meld of Edward Hopper moodiness and Pierre Bonnard color — stayed the same, as did the narrative form, but the content took on sharp focus, evident in this beautiful show of paintings, "Strange State of Being," from later in his career. (Steers died of complications from AIDS in 1995 at 32.)

In several, the setting is a sickroom, and in some the allegorical mode still dominates. In the early "Crow" from 1988, a half-dressed man touches the forehead of another man as if feeling for signs of fever as a black bird wings toward them like a maleficent angel. In a later painting, "Hospital Bed" (1993), the story is more straightforward. A figure lies in a bed cradled by another figure. It's a classic Mary-and-Jesus "Pieta," except that both the figures are men, both nude, and the prone man is breathing oxygen through a tube.

Pictures like these came across with an immediate, lived emotional weight when they first appeared during the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s, and do again today during the pandemic. And that weight is differently powerful now. "I would like to be able to act or have someone care about me the way some of the people in my paintings act or care about each other," Steers said in a 1994 interview. But the coronavirus has made the consoling *in extremis* intimacy that he depicts nearly impossible.

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