



Hugh Steers

**Hugh Steers: *Day Light***

January 8–February 14, 2015

Alexander Gray Associates

### **Day Light**

The exhibition and catalog *Day Light* bring together paintings and works on paper produced by Hugh Steers (1962–1995) between 1990 and 1992 that exemplify his virtuous use of light and color to render allegorical and humanist images. The featured works illustrate his creative process of working through ideas and formal concerns by generating expressionistic oil on paper sketches before painting larger compositions on canvas. The exhibition positions Steers' residency at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in the summer of 1991, as a turning point in the artist's practice. Through the 1980s, Steers painted interior scenes as he gradually developed an aesthetic characterized by vivid colored scenes imbedded with a heightened intimacy. While at Skowhegan, he turned toward outdoor landscapes, brightening his color palette and emphasizing the presence of natural light, as rendered in the 1991 paintings *Telephone Poles*, *Maroon Shed*, *Raft*, and *Shadow Box*.

Steers' understanding of color and light, and his ability to express a wide range of emotions through figuration, reveal his deep knowledge of and direct influences from art history. The contrasting light of his work often references Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, his elongated and sharp



Pierre Bonnard, *La Toilette au bouquet rouge et jaune* (*Dressing Table with Mirror*), c.1913, oil on canvas, 49.21h x 43.31w in; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA / Museum purchase funded by Audrey Jones Beck / Bridgeman Images; © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris



Hugh Steers, *Morning Terrace*, 1992



Edward Hopper, *First Branch of the White River, Vermont*, 1938, watercolor and graphite on paper, 21.75h x 26.87w in; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; William Emerson Fund, 39.43, Photograph © 2015 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Hugh Steers, *Maroon Shed*, 1991

figures are informed by El Greco, his intimate imagery and unorthodox poses point to Pierre Bonnard and Edgar Degas, and his figurative compositions speak to Edward Hopper. Grounded in technique and the history of Western painting, he described his work as “allegorical realism” rendered “to draw the viewer in through the lure of a comfortingly recognizable style and then confront him with a subject matter of a challenging nature.”

Diagnosed in 1987 with HIV, Steers’ subject matter often speaks to the experience of living through an evolving Queer identity and the devastating AIDS crisis. Much of his work addressed illness, isolation, alienation, companionship, and sexuality. While he described his images as “metaphors that come from very specific needs and things on my part,” he repeatedly insisted that the meanings of his paintings depended on what the viewer brings to them. For Steers, his work powerfully embodies the clash between mass culture and personal instinct.

### Hugh Steers\*

I see my paintings as allegories or symbolic representations of a personal consciousness. And, of course, they include a lot of art history. *Man & IV*—it’s part of a series called “Hospital Man”—is modeled on a tradition of power figures in European painting. The hand-on-hip pose is like figures by

van Dyck or Velázquez. Instead of a scepter he’s got his intravenous stand; the bed is very Empire. They’re style elements that suggest a certain kind of subject matter and then confound it. I think there’s actually something faintly angelic about the image, with the white hospital clothes looking like a baby-doll dress or a christening gown.

In another painting I finished recently I show two nude men lying in a hospital bed. One of them has a catheter entering his chest and the other man kisses the point of entry. The Hickman catheter is a rubber tube inserted into the main artery to your heart; it’s for medication to prevent AIDS-related blindness, which is of concern to me. The device is such a weird invasion of the body. Once it’s implanted you have to keep it in, and a lot of people die of infection from it. The image itself, though, is about eroticizing illness. The whole AIDS thing is so peculiar and complicated and vast. It’s tied in with sex and one’s perception of oneself and desire. I’m trying to touch on all of this in my paintings.

I’ve always done figurative work. I don’t know why. It probably has to do with my social background and the fact that I always had a certain facility with drawing. I was also fortunate in having a good teacher in high school who nurtured that. When I showed at Midtown Payson Gallery in 1989 they saw me in a realist line that included Paul Cadmus. But I didn’t see it that way. I saw what I was doing as making sense in a contemporary context. It was right in there with photography and conceptual art, which I’d studied in art history courses and also saw a lot at Yale. Anyway, my work got a little difficult for them in 1991, especially when it started to incorporate more transvestism. At first it was acceptable because the paintings were somewhat retiring, almost apologetic. Then the work started to be about I’m-going-to-wear-heels-and-fuck-you. It was a tougher, more in-your-face approach. It was after that that I started showing with Richard Anderson.

There was “gay” content all along in my work but this whole notion is problematic and needs some discussion. I go out into “gay culture” and I feel like a total alien. At the same time what I paint comes from my experience and my reaction to things going on around me. It’s always been true. All the way back in high school I was in the closet but I was doing drawings of nude males and one inspired by the Eisenstadt photograph of Marlene Dietrich in a top hat holding a cigarette. Then I did a little painting inspired by Racine’s *Phèdre*, which we were reading in French class. What could be more “forbidden love” than that?

These days, finally, the voices of people who are attracted to the same sex are being heard and allowed to develop and play off each other. And the important thing we're finding in the process is that there are just as many individual consciousnesses within the context of being gay as there are within the context of being straight. It's not possible to say that there is any one "gay content." "Gay art" is a marketing label. It will be tricky to see if that can be avoided, but it's important to discuss it and expose the fallacy of lumping us all together.

It's important to be aware of the problem of critical reception toward minority efforts in the arts. You see things praised to the heavens, then you go and see them and they're terrible. It's patronizing. Why shouldn't everyone be held to similar standards? The quality issue is important. I don't want anyone to be doing me any favors in that way either. It's my job to just keep cracking away at the art and give it some sense of authority. I can't just slip by because I happen to be gay.

I also try to stay clear of any notions that art is uncovering some sort of truth or that it's revealing your consciousness. I think instead that a truth and a consciousness are being created with each painting. Basically, as an artist, if you're doing your job you can get out ahead of yourself. I really feel like these hospital paintings are affecting my life as I make them by helping me accept my own sexuality and my illness. I don't work well with anger, but a while back I did a large painting of a black man in super-high platform heels and it occurred to me that these heels are a symbol: the more outrageous they get, the higher, the more assertive, the greater vessels of rage they become, the more they project a kind of defiance, an aggressive sexuality. At the same time they're hobbling, binding, unnatural. I'm trying to embrace all of that, all those aspects of me. Vulnerability can be a source of power as opposed to the usual power associated with maleness. Why not talk about being vulnerable as a powerful voice and as a way of effecting change?

I was in the hospital in January 1991 and that's when the hospital content kicked in. I've expanded more and more on that, including the bathroom motif which has appeared in the work in my last two shows. It ties in with the illness. The bathrooms represent culture and instinct in collision. We shit and piss and get sick and throw-up and then we wash ourselves and we're naked there before we throw on all the signifiers. And there's the incredible fact that in the bathroom we've created all this sculpture for

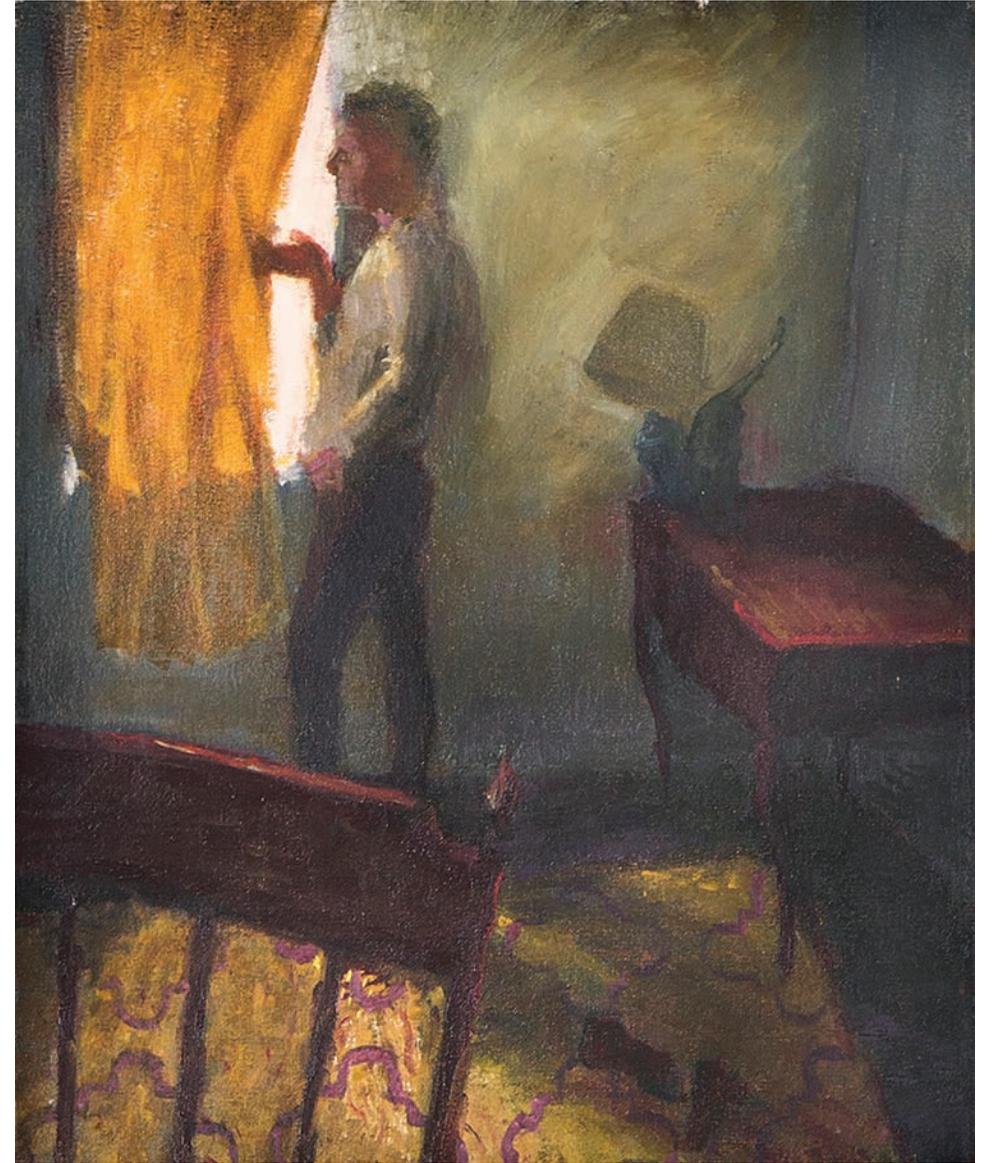
depositing our waste. Illness is such a crucial subject. Everyone, especially in America, has a horror of it and an obsession with cleanliness and mortality, when only a hundred years ago people caught a cold and died. It is all part of having to deal with having AIDS. How do I embrace this thing and make it okay or make myself able to live with it and produce and go on from there? How do I live every day with despair?

One other thing: a lot of my art has to do with that primal idea of drawing a painting of the hunt on the side of the cave to make the hunt successful. It's like a conjuring. 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. It's as if painting it will make it become real. That painting of a man holding another man is conjuring that tenderness, that hope that someone will still care about you and will be there. The Isenheim altarpiece shows a tortured man with skin lesions and it was painted for a monastery where people were treated for horrible skin diseases. Some people who see my paintings find them too much. But others say: "Right on. It's so great to see this part of our lives out there in a painting."

\* Hugh Steers interviewed by Holland Cotter for "Art after Stonewall: 12 Artists Interviewed," originally published in *Art in America*, June 1994, pp. 55–65. Courtesy BMP Media Holdings, LLC.



Hugh Steers, New Haven, CT, c.1985



*Falling Lamp*, 1987



*Blue Uniform*, 1991

Hugh Steers  
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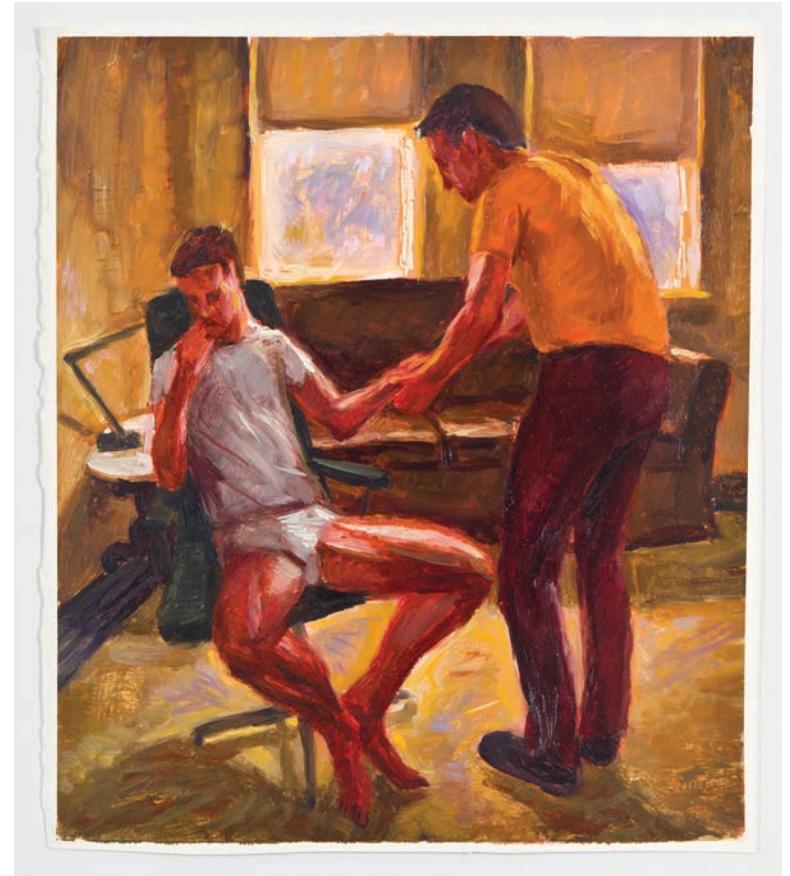




*Morning Terrace*, 1992



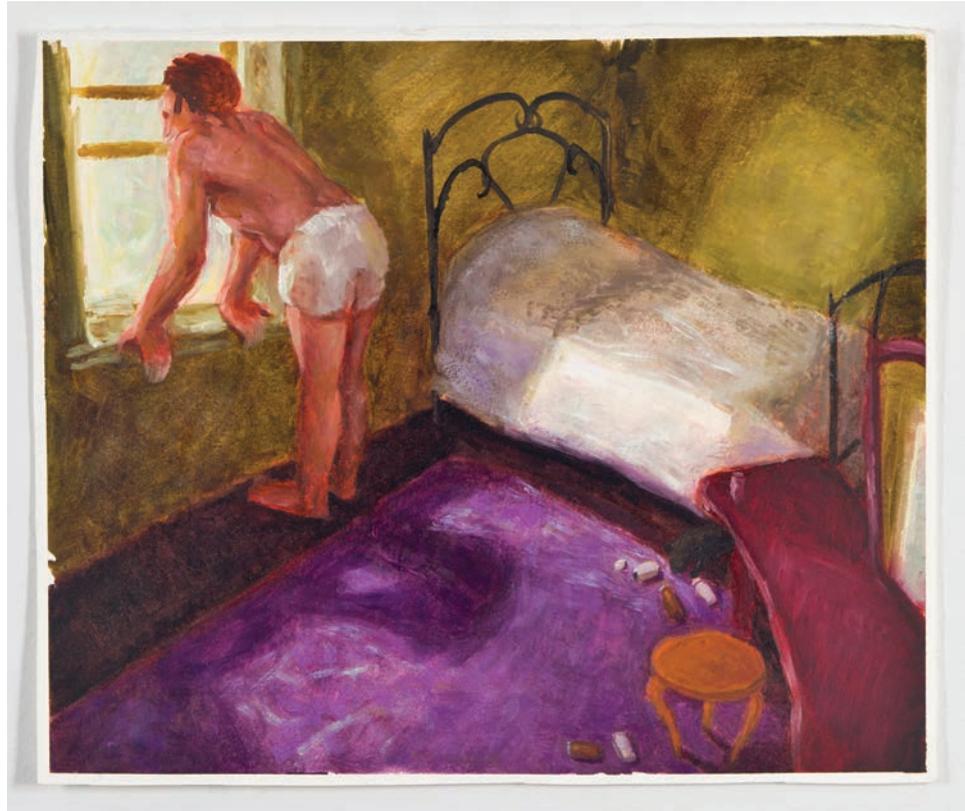
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2015



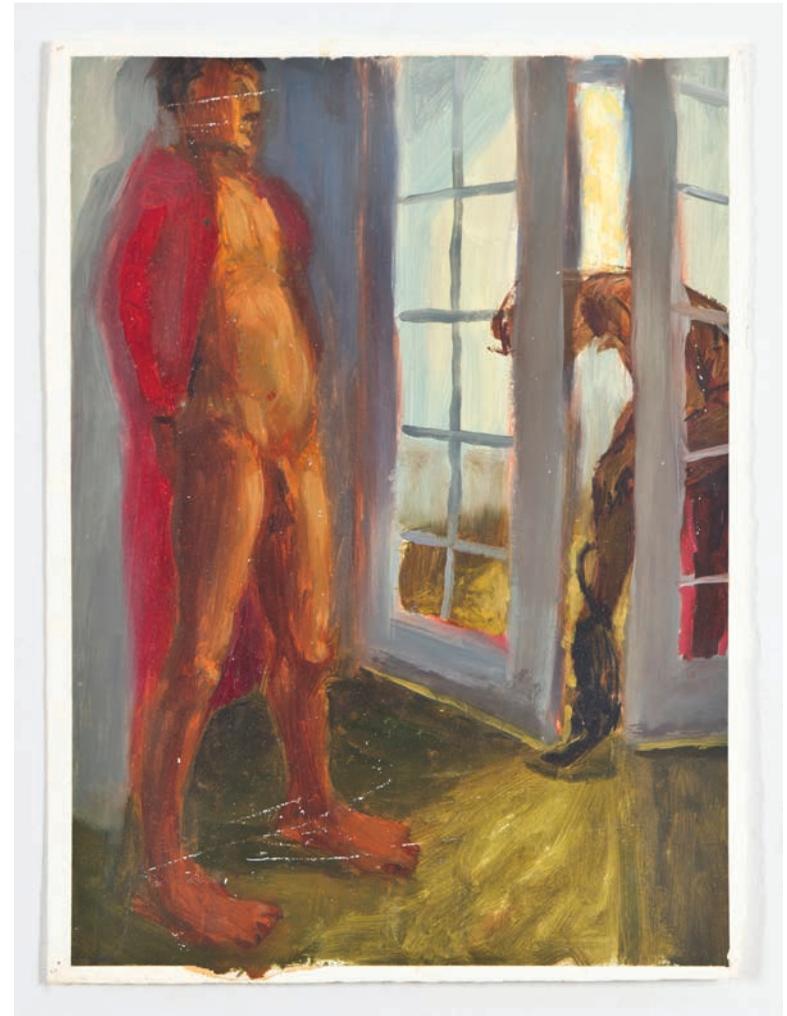
*Brown Couch*, 1992



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2015



*Purple Rug, 1990*



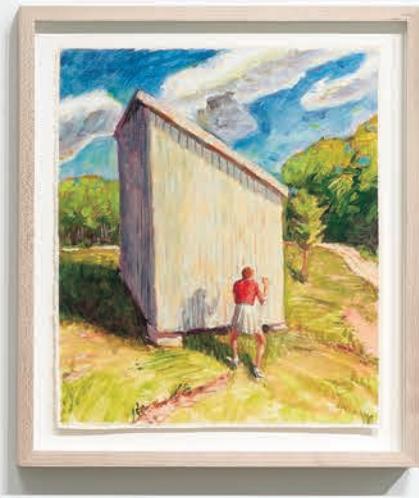
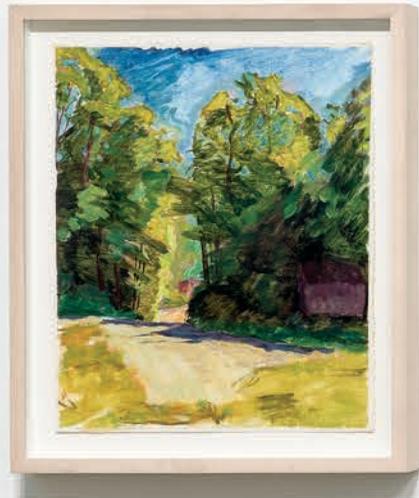
*French Doors, 1988*



*Futon Couch*, 1991



*Maroon Shed, 1991*



Facing: *Study II*, 1991  
Above left: *Shadow Box II*, 1991  
Right: *Study I*, 1991



*Telephone Poles, 1991*



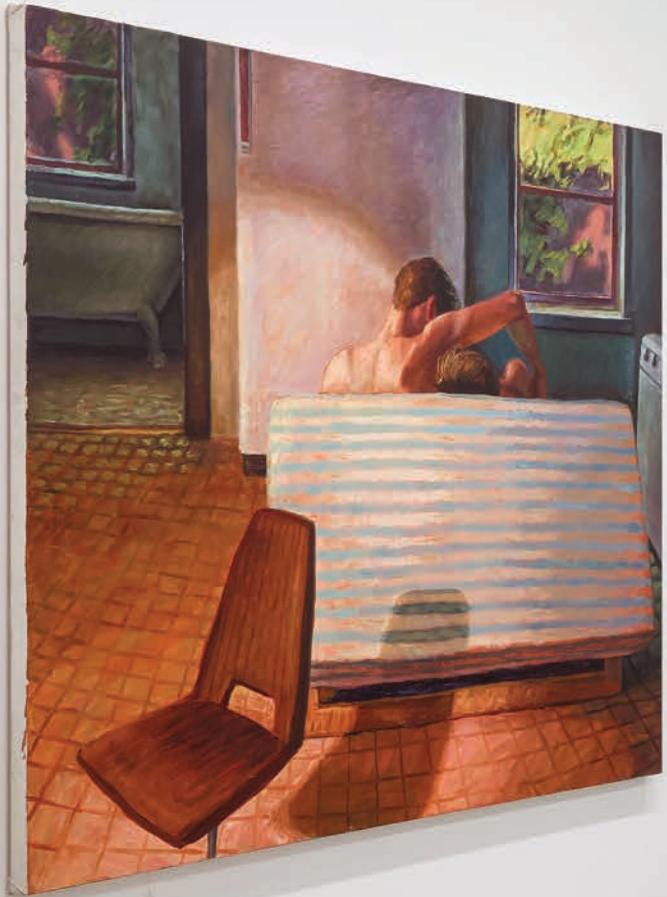
*Shadow Box*, 1891



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2015



*Raft*, 1991



Hugh Steers (b.1962, Washington, DC–1995, New York, NY) studied painting at Yale University and Parsons School of Art and Design. Steers was celebrated for his allegorical paintings that captured the emotional and political tenor of New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly the impact of Queer identity and the AIDS crisis. Steers maintained a commitment to figuration throughout his career, cut dramatically short by AIDS at the age of 32. Influenced by historical figures including, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Cadmus, Thomas Eakins, and Edward Hopper, he embraced representational painting and figuration at a time when such approaches were especially unfashionable.

Steers described his artistic perspective in an interview in September 1992: “I think I’m in the tradition of a certain kind of American artist—artists whose work embodies a certain gorgeous bleakness. Edward Hopper, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline—they all had this austere beauty to them. They found beauty in the most brutal forms. I think that’s what characterizes America, the atmosphere, its culture, its cities and landscape. They all have that soft glow of brutality.”

Steers rendered intimate scenes that embraced the polemics of identity politics, mortality issues, eroticism, and frailty. His compositions are distinguished by a dramatic and colorful palette, skewed use of perspective, and a masterful depiction of light. His painting took a departure from the more didactic work of his peers. During the last years of his artistic practice he introduced a fictive alter ego, a slender figure wearing a hospital gown, as he focused his compositions on AIDS, as it affected gay men, as a subject matter. His scenes draw on community experience and his own imagination to create dreamlike allegory interlaced with figurative realism. The resulting images amplify issues of mortality and isolation, defiance, and compassion.

His work has been exhibited at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2013); New Museum of Contemporary Art (1994); Richard Anderson, New York (1992); Midtown Galleries, New York (1992); Denver Art Museum, CO (1991); Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY (1988); and the Drawing Center, New York (1987); among others. Steers’ work is in private and public art collections such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center, and the Denver Art Museum. In 1989, Steers received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship. His work will be featured in the exhibition *Art AIDS America* curated by Jonathan Katz and Rock Hushka at the Tacoma Art Museum, WA in September 2015. A forthcoming comprehensive monographic catalogue of Steers’ work will be published by Visual AIDS in 2015.



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2015

**Checklist**

*Falling Lamp*, 1987  
 Oil on canvas  
 19.25h x 15.63w in (48.9h x 39.7w cm)

*French Doors*, 1988  
 Oil on gessoed paper  
 15.2h x 11.1w in (38.61h x 28.19w cm)

*Purple Rug*, 1990  
 Oil on gessoed paper  
 11.2h x 13.4w in (28.45h x 34.04w cm)

*Raft*, 1991  
 Oil on canvas  
 40h x 30.25w in (101.6h x 76.84w cm)

*Telephone Poles*, 1991  
 Oil on canvas  
 50h x 44w in (127h x 111.76w cm)

*Shadow Box*, 1991  
 Oil on canvas  
 44h x 30.25w in (111.76h x 76.84w cm)

*Maroon Shed*, 1991  
 Oil on canvas  
 60h x 60w in (152.4h x 152.4w cm)

*Study I*, 1991  
 Oil on gessoed paper  
 11h x 12.3w in (27.94h x 31.24w cm)

*Study II*, 1991  
 Oil on gessoed paper  
 13.3h x 11.1w in (33.78h x 28.19w cm)

*Shadow Box II*, 1991  
 Oil on gessoed paper  
 13h x 11.1w in (33.02h x 28.19w cm)

*Futon Couch*, 1991  
 Oil on canvas  
 56h x 60w in (142.24h x 152.4w cm)

*Blue Uniform*, 1991  
 Oil on canvas  
 66h x 72w in (167.64h x 182.88w cm)

*Brown Couch*, 1992  
 Oil on gessoed paper  
 12.8h x 11w in (32.51h x 27.94w cm)

*Morning Terrace*, 1992  
 Oil on canvas  
 72h x 54w in (182.88h x 137.16w cm)

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Cover image: *Maroon Shed*, detail, 1991, oil on canvas, 60h x 60w in (152.4h x 152.4w cm)

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