

Hugh Steers: Artist

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A Strange State of Being

Artist Hugh Steers Rendered the Anguish, Alienation & Activism Prompted by HIV/AIDS

by Hank Trout

From now through April 3, 2021, Alexander Gray Associates, New York presents "Hugh Steers: Strange State of Being," their fifth exhibition of the figurative painting of Hugh Steers, the New York City artist who succumbed to AIDS in 1995 at the age of thirty-two. The first exhibition was a group show also featuring Andy Warhol and Paul Cadmus, two generational predecessors, reflecting progressing artistic and cultural concerns. The current exhibition takes its title from a 1994 quote from the young painter: "There seems to be a buzz...I'm in such a strange state of being, and nothing's ever going to be the same."

Indeed, nothing was ever the same for Steers after his HIV diagnosis in 1987. His work took on a somber, enigmatic, tender quality, as he painted scenes of sickness and loss, documenting the physical and emotional costs of the AIDS pandemic.



Hugh Steers, Sleeping Cat, 1988, oil on canvas, 39 4/8 by 47 5/8 inches (100.58 x 121.16 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers.



Hugh Steers, Official Letter, 1990, oil on canvas, 50 by 44 1/8 inches (127 x 112.01 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers.

The paintings on display in “Strange State of Being” demonstrate his deep appreciation of art history, particularly the Western canon, as Steers sought inspiration in El Greco, Edward Hopper, and Paul Cadmus. He told an interviewer shortly before his death, “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.” His work also contains references to classical images, such as crows and snakes, as omens of impending death.

Dedicated to capturing that “soft glow of brutality” in his paintings, Steers took ordinary, mundane everyday scenes and infused them with an intensely melancholic mixture of pain, longing, loneliness, fear, and yes, eroticism. Despite the somber tones and the obvious pain and isolation in his paintings of two or more people in the same frame, there is still an erotic element in Steers’ depiction of these ordinary-looking, nude or nearly nude men. It is worth noting that none of the men in any of these paintings is looking face-to-face at the other, enhancing the dread-filled sense of loss and isolation. Take *Sleeping Cat* (1988). In this painting, a nude man lies on his right side, his left arm draped over the side of the bed, his head craned back and half buried in a pillow. A black cat snuggles near the man’s armpit. Another figure, also nude, sits on the side of the bed, with his right hand resting on the prone man’s shoulder. Wrapped around the sitting man’s leg, we see a black snake, the harbinger of death. Both men appear to be rail-thin; the sitting man, painfully so. The painting is almost indescribably sad and somber, and yet there is a lovely, almost erotic tenderness there as well.



Hugh Steers, Hospital Bed, 1993, oil on canvas, 61 2/8 by 65 1/8 inches (155.7 x 165.35 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers.

In the large (61.25 by 65.13 inches) *Hospital Bed*, we see one man sitting in the middle of a bed in a rather dingy-looking hospital room, naked except for his bright blue socks. Across his lap lies another man, naked except for a sheet pulled over his legs, an I.V. needle taped to his arm, another tube down his nose, his neck cradled in the sitting man's hand. His head is tilted back, his eyes closed, as the man cradling him looks stoically at his painfully thin torso. In a nod to Steers' love for the Western canon of art, the arrangement of their bodies calls to mind Michelangelo's somber, reverential *Pieta*. In *Clean Up*, again we encounter two men, one collapsed prone on a bathroom floor, the other standing with his foot on the lid of the commode, using a cloth to clean his foot or the commode, looking at the man on the floor. Despite the somber mood of the painting (somehow, we just know that the standing man is cleaning up a mess made by the man on the floor), the position of the man standing recalls Degas' paintings of dancers tying on their ballet slippers—an odd reference in a very melancholy painting.



Hugh Steers, Clean Up, 1987, oil on gessoed paper, 14 7/8 by 11 3/8 inches (37.85 x 28.96 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers.

In all three of these paintings of two men, Steers manages to find beauty in the men's pain and sorrow. In each, there is a gentleness in the men's interactions, a great deal of tenderness and love between the men depicted. Steers manages to communicate joy and loving even in the face of deepest despair, inviting the viewer to experience narratives of mortality and compassion. This may reflect Steers' own search for love as an HIV-positive young man. He told an interviewer, "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."

Of the images of one person alone in the frame, two stand out for me. *Official Letter* depicts a nude woman sitting on the side of a bed, her head covered in a brown paper bag. On the floor, among a beach ball and a Koons-like statue of a rabbit, lies the

letter. Could this be the "official letter" with news of her HIV diagnosis? With its reference to hooding, the painting draws parallels between an execution and a positive HIV diagnosis. It also references the U.S. government's refusal to deal with the devastation of the AIDS crisis. In *Bandages*, another large work (60 by 42 inches), a slender man stands before a mirror, his hand over his heart, his head tilted back, his groin and buttocks covered with white bandages taped to the skin. The man's face appears young, calmer than its reflection, which is turned in the opposite direction with an open groaning mouth, giving the painting a "Dorian Gray" aspect. The man's reflection seems to be saying, "What in the name of God is happening to me?" Both paintings are dark, ominous looking.



Hugh Steers, Gold Box, 1988, oil on canvas, 54 1/8 by 65 1/2 inches (137.32 x 166.37 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers.

“Enigmatic” is a word that often appears in appraisals of Steers’ art. Take, for example, *Gold Box*. In that painting, a man sits at a kitchen table, his hands spread flat on the tabletop; there is a gold box on the table, out of which crawls a black snake. The man’s head and face are obscured by an impish little girl with her legs around his neck, her arms encircling his head, rendering him blind. The painting references the myth of Pandora’s Box, with death and disease (the black snake) crawling out of the gold box. Is the impish little girl protecting the man from the knowledge of death and disease, or is she blinding him so he cannot close the box and escape disease and death? His own death, or others’? The somber, enigmatic painting raises more questions than it answers—which may reflect the uncertainty and fear that surrounded HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and ‘90s.

Steers often directed his gaze, and his ire, at the U.S. government, employing megaphones, gas masks, and U.S. flags to underscore the lack of a timely response to the epidemic. See *Gas Mask* and *Flag, Megaphone* from 1992 as two prime examples.



Hugh Steers, Gas Mask, 1992, oil on paper, 12 1/2 by 11 1/8 inches (31.75 x 28.57 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers.

Steers' paintings clearly voice his fears and desires, the somberness of making art under the shadow of HIV/AIDS, the shadows of his own impending death, that "soft glow of brutality." His enigmatic scenes of sickness and tenderness bear powerful witness to the true cost of the AIDS pandemic. There is plenty of disease and grief in Steers' work, but through the process of making art, he seems to rise above those horrors. His continuing to paint up to the very end speaks to his resilience. He seems to remember, after all, that when Pandora opened the box left in her care, releasing sickness, death, and many other unspecified evils into the world, one thing was left behind—Hope.

The exhibition Hugh Steers: Strange State of Being runs through April 3, 2021, at Alexander Gray Associates, 510 West 26 Street, New York NY 10001. For more information, log on to <https://www.alexandergray.com>.

Senior Editor Hank Trout interviewed artist Steven F. Dansky for the [August 2020 Gallery](#).