

Art Market

Inside the Market: Hugh Steers's Paintings Find Auction Success Three Decades after His Death

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Hugh Steers, *Hudson Bay*, 1994. Courtesy Sotheby's.

The latest

Two lots by the late Hugh Steers sold for far more than their estimates at Sotheby's "Contemporary Discoveries" auction in New York this week. The American figurative painter, whose promising career was cut short when he died of AIDS-related complications in 1995 at just 32, is known for his fearless depictions of gay life, often rendered in quiet interiors tinged with symbolism and art-historical allusions. Steers is notable, too, for his embrace of representational art in the 1980s and '90s, a time when the style was largely considered outmoded.

Both pieces at Sotheby's exceeded presale expectations, with the large-scale ***Hudson Bay*** (1994) going for \$69,300, 73% above its mid-estimate, and the intimate ***Red Velvet***

Curtain (1992) hammering at \$20,160, more than double its mid-estimate. In content, the works are in line with Steers's broader oeuvre, which dealt with the struggles of life as a queer man living during the 1980s and '90s, and feature the attention to light and allegory that typified many of his paintings. (***Hudson Bay*** also includes a subject clad in a white hospital gown and heels—a figure he considered to be a self-portrait and that appeared in several of his late works.) The sales also continue the recent market success of an artist whose reputation is again on the rise nearly three decades after his death, and who only made his auction debut this past spring.



Hugh Steers, *Red Velvet Curtain*, 1992. Courtesy Sotheby's.

Key figures

- Educated at Parsons, Yale, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Steers had his first solo show in 1989 at Osuna Gallery in Washington, D.C.
- During his life, he was included in group exhibitions at the Drawing Center, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the New Museum, among other institutions, and his solo presentations included shows at the Grey Art Gallery and Richard Anderson, whose namesake would become his dealer.



Hugh Steers, *White Cat Leaving*, 1987, Heritage Auctions, **Bidding closed**

- In 2012, Alexander Gray Associates announced its representation of Steers's estate and marked the move with an exhibition that summer, which showed the painter alongside Paul Cadmus and Andy Warhol. Since then, the gallery has staged four solo shows of the artist's work, the most recent of which was in early 2021.
- Other posthumous exhibitions include group shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Tacoma Art Museum, Yossi Milo Gallery, and the RISD Museum, as well art fair presentations at Art Basel in Basel, Frieze Los Angeles, Frieze London, Art Basel in Miami Beach, and a solo booth at ADAA: The Art Show.



Hugh Steers, *Cobalt Heels*, 1991. Courtesy Sotheby's.

- Steers's art is in the collections of the Denver Art Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the New School, the Walker Art Center, the Whitney, the Yale University Art Gallery, and others, and in 2015, Visual AIDS published a comprehensive monograph of his work.
- "More Life," a solo exhibition curated by Russell Tovey and presented at David Zwirner's Paris location in collaboration with Alexander Gray Associates, opened in December 2021 and ran through January 29, 2022; it was the first show dedicated to Steers's work in Europe.
- Steers had a major auction debut in March when Sotheby's sold his *Red and Green Striped Bedspread* (1988) and *Cobalt Heels* (1991). Both surpassed their estimates with the former selling over twice its high estimate, for \$18,900, and the latter going for \$94,500, 215% over its mid-estimate and setting an auction record that still stands for the artist.



Hugh Steers, *Red and Green Striped Bedspread*, 1988. Courtesy Sotheby's.

The takeaway

Steers's reemergence in the art market underscores galleries' amplified commitment to queer artists, as well as the broader art world's drive to uncover previously overlooked talents who never got the recognition they deserved. (Indeed, this fall, Independent will launch Independent 20th Century, a new fair dedicated, in the press release's words, "to artists who made a significant contribution to art history between the years 1900 and 2000, yet who were uncelebrated in their day.")

Moreover, Steers's success at Sotheby's speaks to the current trend of artists' secondary-market works exceeding presale estimates shortly after a major auction debut. Repeat performances like this one are strong indicators: both that the original debut sales weren't mere aberrations—that there's real collector interest in these artists—and that even in the face of inflation and economic uncertainty, collectors remain eager to invest in art by underrecognized creators.

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