

Left: Hugh Steers, *Charity Couple* (1990, oil on canvas, 64" x 72").
Below: Hugh Steers in New York City, 1991.



THE NEWEST REALISTS

EVER SINCE THE DAYS OF REGINALD MARSH AND THOMAS Hart Benton, successive waves of modernist innovators have made traditional realist painting seem hopelessly retrograde. Although there has always been a solid market willing to absorb the works of accessible and crowd-pleasing artists such as Andrew Wyeth, the serious art world has tended to favor regurgitated versions of neoconceptualism and other so-called cutting-edge styles over representational art. These days, however, as the art world becomes more pluralistic, a few talented younger painters are struggling to adapt classical methods to the complex and often dark themes of contemporary urban life.

Hugh Steers and James Romberger live and work on New York City's Lower East Side, but both of them have been picked up by uptown galleries that appreciated their work's affinities with the art of an earlier era. Midtown Payson Galleries shows Steers's canvases along with those of Walt Kuhn, a moody realist active during the first half of the century who, like Steers, was drawn to portrayals of ambiguous yet sexually charged moments. Romberger's large-scale pastels can be seen at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, where the angry messages embedded in his street scenes relate to the

socially critical paintings of the German Expressionist Max Beckmann, also shown at the gallery.

Steers and Romberger both take Manhattan as their primary subject, depicting it as a melancholy landscape of desolate apartments, trashed lots, and busted lives. Romberger's images of Lower East Side streets capture the feeling of an environment approaching a state of total decay. "I love my neighborhood," he says. "There's a real beauty in the decrepitude." Steers tends to favor people trapped in interior settings that suggest low-rent urban living. "I suppose having the situations occur indoors makes it clearer that I'm exploring an



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interior world," he says.

The twenty-nine-year-old Steers says that he decided to immerse himself in his work several years ago, when he discovered he was HIV-positive. "Finding out I had that condition forced me to throw out all distractions," he says. "I've tried to turn the disease into an opportunity, by asking what insights it gives me into living and confronting mortality." Typical Steers locales include doctors' waiting rooms, closet doorways, and bare-bed chambers that could be found in cheap motels. The figures in his lush canvases often seem overwhelmed by torpor, whether they are alone staring out windows or with companions sharing a moment of intimacy. Steers likes to repeat motifs throughout many works: a cat scampers across some of his canvases; a paper bag falling over the heads of his subjects is another recurring image.

"So much of art is about the great climactic moment," says Steers, who notes that he was less influenced by Hopper than by Bonnard. "My work is concerned with the in-between times that make up most of everyday life. I'm also fascinated with confronting the horror of existence—the discovery that you may never love someone or get beyond a certain point or realize certain aspirations—but always, I hope, with humor."

The impact of comic book imagery and the East Village art explosion of the early 1980s were influences absorbed by Romberger, thirty-three, who says that his favorite artist is Jack Kirby, a creator of Captain America and countless other classic superheroes. Romberger still does some work in cartoons (he is currently completing a collaborative strip with David Wojnarowicz, an artist who shows at the P.P.O.W. gallery in New York City), and his vibrant pastel paintings



Left: James Romberger, *Bowery Love Seat* (1987, pastel on paper, 38 1/4" x 25").
Below: James Romberger in the urban jungle, 1991.



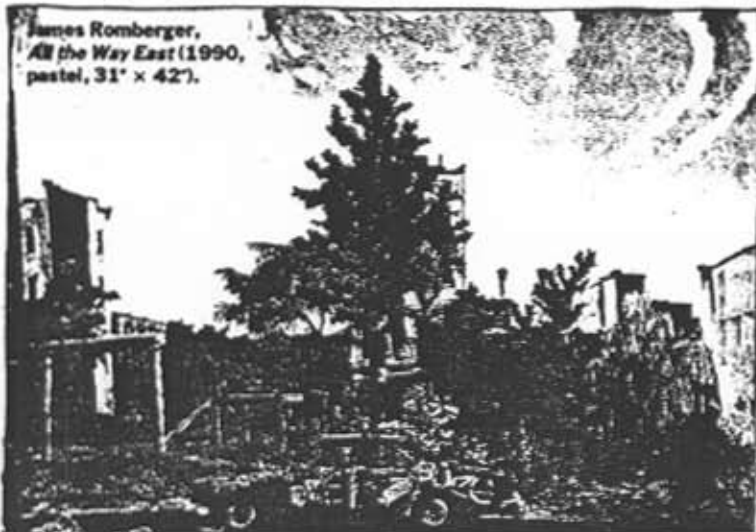
retain an edge of caricature, which only adds to their Goya-esque eloquence. "Very few people take comic book art seriously," says Romberger, who worked briefly for Marvel. "If your work is in a museum or a gallery, there is a much greater chance that people will consider it."

Much of Romberger's work features the cast of dissolute characters found on downtown streets. He has painted riots in the city's volatile Tompkins Square Park, the homeless surrounded by their squalid possessions, and people who could have stepped out of the novels of William Burroughs or Jean Genet. The artist often finds himself astonished by the grotesque subject matter that attracts him. He was surprised that anyone was willing to purchase one of his more morbid recent pieces, a skeleton-filled allegory titled *The Triumph of Death*. "I wouldn't want to live with that one—it's pretty grisly." With paintings already owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum, Romberger seems well on the way to reaching the audience he craves.

In the late nineteenth century, Baudelaire coined the phrase "the painter of modern life" to describe artists such as Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet who had rebelled against the overly academic and allegorical style of their peers to define a new realism. A century later, artists such as Steers and Romberger are once again grappling with a reality refracted through pigment, in opposition to the prevailing pop and conceptual orthodoxies of their day.

—D. P.

Hugh Steers's work is available at Midtown Payson Galleries, 745 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10151; 212-758-1900. James Romberger's work is available at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10019; 212-247-2111.



James Romberger, *All the Way East* (1990, pastel, 31" x 42").