



THE NEW YORKER

NOVEMBER 1, 1993

ART

New Bohemians

THOSE not already familiar with Hugh Steers' work should hasten to his current show of recent paintings and oil sketches (Richard Anderson, 476 Broome Street; through November 13). Because his gallery's previous venue, a storefront on Thompson Street, was so tiny, no more than a couple of Steers' full-scale paintings could be shown together before. Now, in more spacious new quarters, there are six, along with ten small sketches. It's a chance to see a sizable cache of Steers' murky, ethereal pictures, many of which describe a *nouvelle bohème* of club performers and downtown artistes, of East Village tenements in which boys rather than girls play Mimi.

As before, these are traditional works—genre scenes, in fact, with a depressed, thirties feel. They are suffused with poetic atmosphere and low-intensity theatrical effects of light and shadow, and they invite comparisons to such notable chroniclers of poignant domesticity and soulful debauchery as Walter Sickert, Reginald Marsh, and Edward Hopper. Steers' technique is good, if not transcendent, but it is his allegorical imagination—grander now, and more stoically joined to his tragic themes—that makes his work so satisfying. The grandest painting in this show is "Urinals," in which the figure of a sailor lies inert on a public-lavatory floor. It is an elegy to Allen Schindler, the gay sailor who was beaten to death last year by a hostile Navy shipmate. In the theatrical solemnity of the space depicted, and in the haunting angle of the body, we also find a surprisingly powerful homage to Manet's great "Dead Toreador."