

Art in America

April 1994

Hugh Steers at Richard Anderson

This 32-year-old painter has gained a reputation both uptown and down for his stirring fantasies on the theme of gay life in the age of AIDS. Though painted in a deceptively flat-footed style, the works in this show, both small-scale oil sketches and larger oils on canvas, evince an increasingly sophisticated use of theatrical staging and art-historical allusion.

The pièce de résistance here was a public lavatory rendered in plunging perspective. On first sight, Steers's canvas announces itself as a contemporary history painting: the subject matter is obviously drawn from horrific reports of the recent murder of Allen Schindler, a gay sailor who was beaten to death by a shipmate. The fallen figure, whose emphatic horizontality immediately recalls Manet's *Dead Toreador*, seems part religious martyr, part modern hero. Certain details, such as the odd sagging shapes of the urinals, were in fact derived from documentary photos of the crime scene published in the *Village Voice*. Yet in Steers's hands,

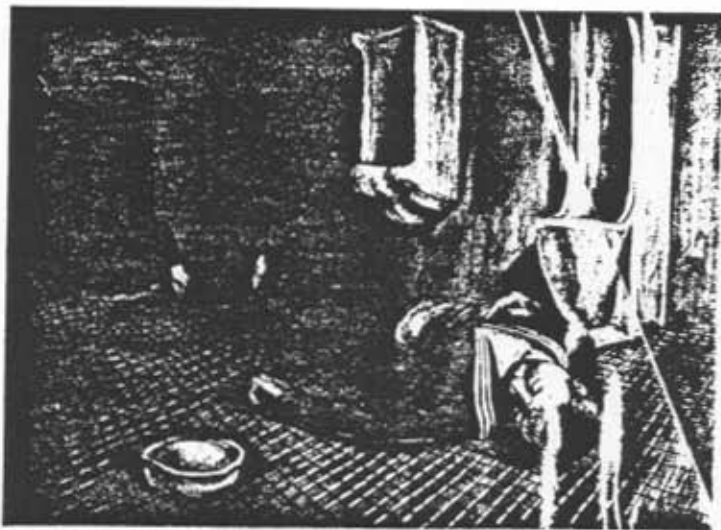
such factual evidence takes on a strangely poetic thrust. The black trash can barely visible in the shadows might allude to an erect phallus, and the larger of the two urinals, with the strongest highlights on it, begins to suggest a Surrealist vision of a sagging scrotum. Steers's decision to underpaint the tile floor a strong red makes the grommeting glow with a preternaturally bloody light. Altogether, a scene of haunting stillness is created in which the burden of proof somehow resides in the inanimate props.

Steers's oil sketches are often fresher than his finished oils. It was these smaller works that first aroused my intense curiosity when I saw them in an Act Up auction some years ago. In the most recent batch, there are moments of intense auto-eroticism. A male figure in *Bandage*, nude except for a diaper, touches his nipples, while a bottle of pills sits nearby on a reproduction Chippendale chair. It is this suggestion of Old World politesse in the props that makes the pathos of a visibly suffering, HIV-positive epebe all the more palpable.

In the most histrionic of the large works, *Hospital Bed*, the dilemma of outlandish protagonists in a humdrum setting becomes almost Greuzian in its intensity. Steers's painting depicts an all-male pieta in which one scantily clad male figure comforts another sprawled in his lap, while the recumbent loved one remains hooked up to an IV unit through his nose and arm. The richly impastoed rendering of the hospital sheets, with its expressionistic mix of

yellow and red brushstrokes, remains refreshingly awkward. In a strange reversal of Greuzian metaphor, the broken pitcher, traditionally used as a symbol of lost virginity, becomes an *unbroken* thermos tellingly isolated on a side table—a metaphor for survival against all odds.

—Brooks Adams



Hugh Steers: *Urinals*, 1993, oil on canvas, 53 by 72 inches; at Richard Anderson.