

HUGH STEERS

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FINE ARTS

For as long as he's shown his work in New York, Hugh Steers has painted genre scenes of gay men in bohemian surroundings, sometimes dressed up in women's clothing, sometimes, apparently, having sex (they're discreetly positioned; it's hard to know for sure). Some suffer from AIDS—catheters, wasted bodies, and hospital robes are much in evidence—and in the gloomy, naked-lightbulb atmosphere, all his subjects take on an abject pallor.

The overall sensibility, despite ominous lighting and portentous poses, is one of self-awareness; each face and body quietly possessed by a sense of its own absurdity. Isolated as they are, Steers' men seem almost amused by their own queer goings-on. These paintings portray a complex emotional state, one characterized not only by exhaustion and isolation but by the nervous laughter and desperate camp that can come with them. Beneath all of this one senses a desire for something transcendent: below a layer of bitterness lies a core of romantic longing.

Steers revises the tradition of narrative realist painting (through the years his work has ceased trying to look "beautiful" or "finished") by borrowing from the ambitions and techniques of abstraction and expressionism—raw, ugly color and clumsy brushwork. The result is visually unsettling in a highly expressive way: Steers balances an inner impatience and rage with an outward desire to communicate through finished images. In this way, the works possess a graphic urgency that one cannot help viewing as closely connected to the emotional state of an artist facing death.

What to make, then, of their wacky humor (a man in pumps, poised atop a toilet bowl, changing a light bulb) and overt sexuality (a solitary figure performing a striptease inside his apartment)? Steers has not made sickness itself, but, rather, his emotional state after being diagnosed as HIV positive the subject of his work. What is central is not the contemplation of mortality but those in-between moments of loneliness, bewilderment, and paranoia that he evokes through the domestic and the commonplace: actions as banal as changing a lightbulb or moving from chair to bed. Illness appears to be a merely secondary concern, a background awareness lending incidental drama.

By depicting men who, though sick, are still resolutely sexual in the most unexpected ways, Steers has dared to introduce comedy and absurdity into the story of living a slow death. This is high-stakes exhibitionism—an eerie, brave, and wonderfully idiosyncratic narrative.

—Justin Spring

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Hugh Steers, *White Satin*, 1993, oil on canvas, 60 x 63".