

# Art in America

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## Art after Stonewall 12 Artists Interviewed

BY HOLLAND COTTER

### Hugh Steers

*Born 1962, Washington, D.C. Studied at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, 1991; Yale University, 1985; Parsons in Europe (France and Italy), 1983. Currently lives in New York. Most recent solo exhibition at Richard Anderson Fine Arts, New York, 1994.*

I see my paintings as allegories or symbolic representations of a personal consciousness. And, of course, they include a lot of art history. *Man & IV*—it's part of a series called "Hospital Man"—is modeled on a tradition of power figures in European painting. The hand-on-hip pose is like figures by van Dyck or Velázquez. Instead of a sceptre he's got his intravenous stand; the bed is very Empire. They're style elements that suggest a certain kind of subject matter and then confound it. I think there's actually something faintly angelic about the image, with the white hospital clothes looking like a baby-doll dress or a christening gown.

In another painting I finished recently I show two nude men lying in a hospital bed. One of them has a catheter entering his chest and the other man kisses the point of entry. The Hickman catheter is a rubber tube inserted into the main artery to your heart; it's for medication to prevent AIDS-related blindness, which is of concern to me. The device is such a weird invasion of the body. Once it's implanted you have to keep it in, and a lot of people die of infection

from it. The image itself, though, is about eroticizing illness. The whole AIDS thing is so peculiar and complicated and vast. It's tied in with sex and one's perception of oneself and desire. I'm trying to touch on all of this in my paintings.

I've always done figurative work. I don't know why. It probably has to do with my social background and the fact that I always had a certain facility with drawing. I was also fortunate in having a good teacher in high school who nurtured that. When I showed at Midtown Payson Gallery in 1989 they saw me in a realist line that included Paul Cadmus. But I didn't see it that way. I saw what I was doing as making sense in a contemporary context. It was right in there with photography and conceptual art, which I'd studied in art-history courses and also saw a lot of at Yale. Anyway, my work got a little difficult for them in 1991, especially when it started to incorporate more transvestism. At first it was acceptable because the paintings were somewhat retiring, almost apologetic. Then the work started to be about I'm-going-to-wear-heels-and-fuck-you. It was a tougher, more in-your-face approach. It was after that that I started showing with Richard Anderson.

There was "gay" content all along in my work but this whole notion is problematic and needs some discussion. I go out into "gay culture" and I feel like a total alien. At the same time what I paint comes from my experience and my reaction to things going on around me. It's always been true. All the way back in high school I was in the closet but I was doing drawings of nude males and one inspired by the Eisenstadt photograph of Marlene Dietrich in a top hat holding a cigarette. Then I did a little painting inspired by Racine's *Phèdre*, which we were reading in French class. What could be more "forbidden love" than that?



*Hugh Steers: Man & IV, 1994, oil on canvas, 65 by 47 inches; from the "Hospital Man" series. Courtesy Richard Anderson Fine Arts.*

**"It's not possible to say that there is any one 'gay content.'  
'Gay art' is a marketing label." —Hugh Steers**

These days, finally, the voices of people who are attracted to the same sex are being heard and allowed to develop and play off each other. And the important thing we're finding in the process is that there are just as many individual consciousnesses within the context of being gay as there are within the context of being straight. It's not possible to say that there is any one "gay content." "Gay art" is a marketing label. It will be tricky to see if that can be avoided, but it's important to discuss it and expose the fallacy of lumping us all together.

It's important to be aware of the problems of critical reception toward minority efforts in the arts. You see things praised to the heavens, then you go and see them and they're terrible. It's patronizing. Why shouldn't everyone be held to similar standards? The quality issue is important. I don't want anyone to be doing me any favors in that way either. It's my job to just keep cracking away at the art and give it some sense of authority. I can't just slip by because I happen to be gay.

I also try to stay clear of any notions that art is uncovering some sort of truth or that it's revealing your consciousness. I think instead that a truth and a consciousness are being created with each painting. Basically, as an artist, if you're doing your job you can get out ahead of yourself. I really feel like these hospital paintings are affecting my life as I

make them by helping me accept my own sexuality and my illness. I don't work well with anger, but a while back I did a large painting of a black man in super-high platform heels and it occurred to me that these heels are a symbol: the more outrageous they get, the higher, the more assertive, the greater vessels of rage they become, the more they project a kind of defiance, an aggressive sexuality. At the same time they're hobbling, binding, unnatural. I'm trying to embrace all of that, all those aspects of me. Vulnerability can be a source of power as opposed to the usual power associated with maleness. Why not talk about being vulnerable as a powerful voice and as a way of effecting change?

I was in the hospital in January 1991 and that's when the hospital content kicked in. I've expanded more and more on that, including the bathroom motif which has appeared in the work in my last two shows. It ties in with the illness. The bathrooms represent culture and instinct in collision. We shit and piss and get sick and throw up and then we wash ourselves and we're naked there before we throw on all the signifiers. And there's the incredible fact that in the bathroom we've created all this sculpture for depositing our waste. Illness is such a crucial subject. Everyone, especially in America, has a horror of it and an obsession with cleanliness and mortality, when only a hundred years ago people caught a cold and died. It is all part of my having to deal with having AIDS. How do I embrace this thing and make it OK or make myself able to live with it and produce and go

on from there? How do I live every day with despair?

One other thing: a lot of my art has to do with that primal idea of drawing a painting of the hunt on the side of the cave to make the hunt successful. It's like a conjuring. I would like to be able to act or have someone care about me the way some of the people in my paintings act or care about each other. It's as if painting it will make it become real. That painting of a man holding another man is conjuring that tenderness, that hope that someone will still care about you and will be there. It's like wishful thinking, a kind of touchstone for those who are traumatized by the same situations. They can see it and say: someone else has been there. The Isenheim altarpiece shows a tortured man with skin lesions and it was painted for a monastery where people were treated for horrible skin diseases. Some people who see my paintings find them too much. But others say: "Right on. It's so great to see this part of our lives out there in a painting."