

Hugh Steers



IMITATIONS: (OPPOSITE) A PORTRAIT OF HUGH STEERS TAKEN AT THE SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE IN THE EARLY 1990S; (ABOVE) STEERS PLAYING IN DECEMBER 1963 WITH STEPCOUSIN JOHN F. KENNEDY JR.; (RIGHT) *URINALS* (1993), STEERS'S HOMAGE TO EDOUARD MANET



WITH LUSHLY BEAUTIFUL CANVASES, AN ARTIST DEPICTED SCENES OF ILLNESS AND INTIMACY

HUGH STEERS WAS AN elegant man known for his wholly inelegant laugh—a bolt of noisy bemusement perhaps made all the more incongruous because it came from this scion of American refinement. Indeed, few writers can resist reminding readers that Steers was related to Gore Vidal (his mother's half brother) and Jackie O. (his mother's stepsister), and this writer is no different on that score. The 32-year-old painter's laugh was even mentioned in a *New York Times* obituary in 1995. It also appeared in Guy Trebay's meditation on the AIDS ghosts of New York in *The Village Voice*. The occasion: 1995's Day Without Art. Trebay, who knew Steers, nailed that sound's existence-affirming implication: "It seemed less a mirthful than an unruly laugh, a sexual sound."

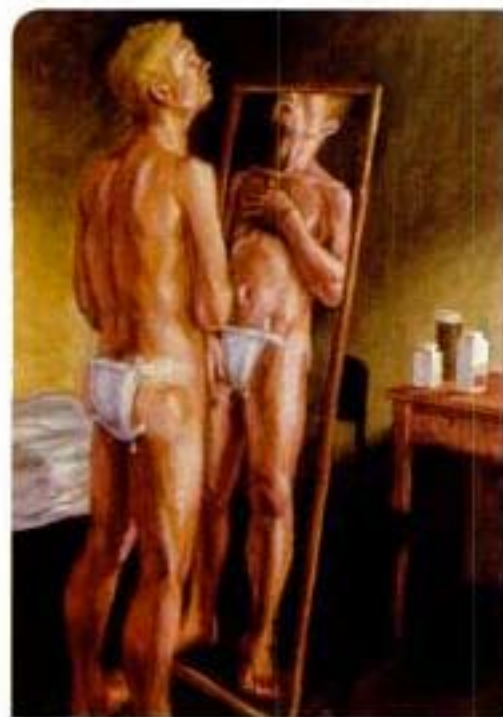
Sex, humor, Eros, and, yes, Thanatos—Steers was no stranger to these tensions: In fact, after his HIV-positive diagnosis in 1987, he increasingly became their champion. And—this is in no way a comfort—as his illness progressed, so did his work, offering bolder, more sharply realized, more subtly allegorical glimpses into his new reality: his domestic partnership with terminal illness.

Steers's incisive journey of reckoning will be on display in a retrospective at

New York City's Richard Anderson Fine Arts (October 17–November 25). Leggy boys in impossibly high heels, pensive men with catheters attached to their chests, the endearingly feisty and vulnerable recurring figure known as Hospital Man ("a superhero fighting for the sexual rights of the sick," Steers called him once in these pages): All these images reach past the moment of heightened crisis to say something lasting about intimacy and illness, melancholy and defiance. Oh, they might be considered old-fashioned if beauty is your marker or if brazen quoting from a master—which Steers did in *Urinals*, his homage to Manet's *Dead Toreador*—riles you. But Steers's images are resolutely stronger than ever.

"There was a time when Hugh was slammed uptown for his content. Then when he came downtown, he was applauded for his content but slammed for his figurative language," says Richard Anderson, who's represented Steers since 1992. "The irony is that the strategy Hugh used—lushly beautiful language to force people to look at difficult content—is becoming more current. Hugh was ahead of his time."

What is it they say about the last laugh? **LISA KENNEDY**



QUIET REFLECTION: STEERS'S *BANDAGES* (1992)