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Hugh Steers

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Alexander Gray Associates

508 West 26th Street, Chelsea

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Art history has so far produced only a sketchy account of work that emerged from the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and '90s. The task is huge and made more difficult because much surviving material is probably languishing half-forgotten in attics, closets and basements. The painter Hugh Steers, who died in 1995 at 32, was fortunate to have a family with both the means and the wish to preserve his output, though only now is it being brought out of storage for this show.

Steers's early, stylistically conservative figurative pictures were allegorical tableaus about psychological self-discovery. With the coming of AIDS and his own illness, his art gained a sharp sense of purpose.

Some of the paintings at [Alexander Gray](#) are of single male figures in shadowed rooms. In "Throat" (1991) a young man dressed in briefs and high heels holds a mirror up to his open mouth, as if looking for signs of disease. Most of the pictures are of male couples in a narrow bathroom with a claw-foot tub. The interactive dynamics change from scene to scene: A nude man crawls away from another as if humiliated; one man tenderly bathes another; a man sprawled on the tiled floor is given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation — the kiss of life — by a partner.

In terms of technique Steers's painting can be workaday. It is carried by operatic flair and cinematic strategies — scenes viewed from high overhead or up from below — that create a sense of inescapable enclosure. Even the plainest of these little rooms is adorned with baroque swags of rich fabric, appropriate to an art that was staging the sovereign emotions — fear, defiance, love and regret — of a desperate time.