

Hugh Steers

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

New York City's cramped tenement apartments were the standard setting for painter Hugh Steers (1962–1995). Within these intimate environs, Steers most often depicted male figures—alone or in pairs—in various states of solemn embrace and ailing woe, evoking the emotional carnage of the AIDS crisis, which ravaged the queer community and claimed Steers's own life when he was thirty-two. For the exhibition "Day Light" at Alexander Gray Associates, these signature interior scenes were

paired with a lesser-known group of outdoor pieces Steers made while in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in idyllic Madison, Maine, in 1991. Together, the two bodies of work illuminate, quite literally, the artist's deft handling of natural light, both indoors and out. The show also revealed the psychological through line of Steers's paintings: a "soft glow of brutality" that the artist said marks the American scene.

The rural surroundings of Madison allowed Steers to try his hand at renderings of the sun's rays shining across verdant landscapes. In works such as *Raft* and *Telephone Poles*, both 1991, daylight falls on lush greenery and rippling water in vivid hues and evinced by choppy, impressionistic brushstrokes. These outdoor paintings evoke the accessible American Regionalism of Grant Wood or Thomas Hart Benton, yet they also evince uneasy undercurrents:

In both works, a lone figure stands in a landscape with a paper bag over his head. This ambiguous yet fraught motif recurs throughout Steers's oeuvre, shrouding his pictures in an apprehensive air.

A similar tense anxiety pervades Steers's interior works from New York City. In the large-scale *Blue Uniform*, 1991, for instance, we find a seated, nude figure clutching his stomach and neck in apparent anguish while a standing figure in briefs seems to deliberate over what to do next. Meanwhile, a black cat casually crosses the foreground—a premonition of dire circumstances just around the corner. Like the paper bags in the "portraits" described above, black cats are a fixture in Steers's work. In *Falling Lamp*, 1987, a small canvas painted the year the artist was diagnosed with HIV, a dark feline tips over a light on a table. Pictured midfall, the teetering lamp symbolizes life on the brink, while a solitary man stares despondently out the window.

Indeed, Steers's work is haunted by the specter of AIDS. Although representational painting was far from the style du jour of the late 1980s and early '90s, Steers's figuration, like that of contemporaries Martin Wong and Frank Moore, has received increased recognition in recent years. Steers's allegorical imagery provided him with the tools to render the tragedies of his time, most resonantly in his late series "Hospital Man," 1993–95 (not on view here), in which a gaunt patient in a hospital gown and high heels reigns over bathroom and bedroom scenes among pills, bandages, and an IV. A precedent for "Hospital Man" can be found in the 1992 canvas *Morning Terrace*, the most striking painting on display. Through the open window of a New York City apartment with a radiator, the bottom half of a high-heeled figure is provocatively pictured on an outdoor balcony, the figure's lower legs warmly lit by



Hugh Steers, *Morning Terrace*, 1992, oil on canvas, 72 x 54".

natural light, the thighs and buttocks obscured by a smudged window-pane. A gendered uncertainty hangs over the scene, as the shoes could belong to either a man or a woman. The queer identity and intimacy that was burgeoning amid the devastating impact of AIDS informed the radiant yet melancholic aura of Steers's impressive body of work. We are left wondering what he would have done next.

—Alex Fialho

Francesco Vezzoli

MOMA PS1

Francesco Vezzoli is an ambitious artist, to be sure. A case in point is the fraught history of his recent exhibition at MOMA PS1: In 2013, the Milan-based artist sought to purchase the ruins of a nineteenth-century southern Italian church, ship the entire thing to New York City, and rebuild the structure in the museum's courtyard, where he would exhibit his videos. But the dream was not to be: Italian courts, concerned with cultural preservation, intervened and halted the action. Until then, it seemed Vezzoli was unstoppable in achieving his visions of excess.

Enter "Teatro Romano": Staged in a large black-walled gallery on MOMA PS1, this significantly scaled-back production spotlighted five Roman marble busts of gods and men, all dating from the first and second centuries AD. Sited on tall plinths spaced generously throughout the room, the sculptures were painted with palettes inspired by the original artifacts' polychromy; two millennia ago, these busts would have been decorated in garish hues made with pulverized organic pigments such as cinnabar, also known as "dragon's blood" red. Yet rather than remain perfectly faithful to the past, Vezzoli selected hues that he preferred. (Color has long been an interest for him; in the mid-1990s, Vezzoli remade Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square" series as a group of small embroideries.) As Clemente Marconi, a professor in the history of Greek art and archaeology at New York University (and one of a group of experts with whom the artist consulted while making this work), explained in a handout, "[f]ar from being a process of reconstructing the original polychromy of these ancient sculptures, this was an act of interpreting their carved forms through paint."

Given Vezzoli's well-known films involving our own contemporary deities (A-list Hollywood celebrities) and his decision to employ fleshy colors—as well as bright-pink lips and sparkling blue eyes—we were spurred here to look for resemblances in the ghostly faces of these sculptures. *TRUE COLORS (A Marble Head of the Resting Satyr, circa Late 1st Century A.D.)*, 2014, seems to depart from Elijah Wood as Frodo Baggins, while *TRUE COLORS (A Marble Portrait Head of Man, Roman Imperial, Antonine, circa Mid-2nd Century A.D.)*, also 2014, mimics a bearded Seth Rogen. It wasn't all Tinseltown, though: Thankfully, the broken-off noses of a goddess and of Isis were not fixed via rhinoplasty.

"My new obsession is the past," the artist said in an interview with *T Magazine* in October. The statement was an odd one, since Vezzoli has always been obsessed with the past, both the relatively recent (Cinecittà divas) and the more dis-

