

Hugh Steers: Artist

aumag.org/2016/04/19/hugh-steers-artist/

April 19, 2018



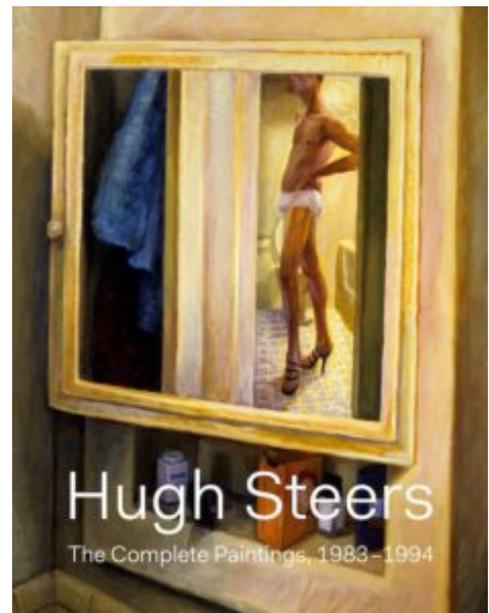
Gorgeous Bleakness: Beauty in the Most Brutal Forms

American figurative painter Hugh Steers lures us back to a desperate time through his arresting, full-color imagery in Visual AIDS's recently published, first monograph featuring over 600 works by the artist: *Hugh Steers: The Complete Paintings, 1983–1994*

by Sean Black

[dropcap]G[/dropcap]orgeous bleakness. These are his words self-describing his artistic perspective in an interview in September of 1992, just three years prior to his death from AIDS at the age of thirty-two. Hugh Auchincloss Steers (1962–1995) not only embraced representational painting and figuration unlike other approaches more in fashion at the time, but also his dealing with and succumbing to AIDS which he cinematically illustrates in bold vibrant colors throughout his deeply personal descent.

Countering his Neo Pop contemporaries Steers offered, "I think I'm in the tradition of a certain kind of American artist—artists whose work embodies a certain gorgeous bleakness: Edward Hopper, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline—they all had this austere beauty to them. They found beauty in the most brutal forms. I think that's what characterizes America, the atmosphere, its culture, its cities and landscape. They all have that soft glow of brutality."



The soft glow to which Steers refers emanates quite literally as well as figuratively from his rich allegorical paintings brushed and lacquered with honesty, tenderness, humor, sensuality, liberation and ultimately acceptance of his dramatically shortened mortality. Upsetting at times yet always intriguing, these medium-sized (on paper) and large-scale (on canvas) melancholy tableaux deliberately unnerve in tight quarters, on precarious ledges, in radiant hues and deep shades while illuminating the failing health of Steers and his friends during a grim era never redundant in the constant reminders of his own high probability of death. Turning away from the morbid and helpless however, Steers hallucinogenic dreamscapes are boldly imaginative and ultimately brave. A notable example, *Black Bag*, 1993 (oil on canvas 45 by 38 inches) presents a transient character center stage, a grim reaper of sorts, the lost lover he longed for, or perhaps a hurried friend off to another funeral decked in symbolic black attire; the sling-back heals in tow representing another life taken after an arduous fight. Predominately male characters occupy his painted space; languid, in pumps, teetering, many times bare or in white briefs and usually coupled, all never appearing any older than the artist himself.



Raft, 1991, oil on canvas, 40 by 30.25 inches (101.6h x 76.84w cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York • © 2016 Estate of Hugh Steers / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Born and raised in aristocratic privilege in Washington, D.C. to an affluent and political family, Steers trained in painting at Yale University and Parsons School of Art and Design. As noted in one of his impressive biographies, “he was celebrated for his ability to capture the emotional and political tenor of New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly the impact of Queer identity and the AIDS crisis.” Coming from a family of means both artistically and financially as well, Steers’ work has been maintained, unlike that of many of his contemporaries of the time dying of AIDS whose work was swept away and lost in frenzy of chaos, abandonment, financial distress, desolation and sickness.

In an A&U interview in August 2005 by Dann Dulin, Steers’ uncle, the late Gore Vidal said, “I know a thousand people, I suppose, who’ve died from it but the only person that I knew well was my nephew, Hugh Steers [A&U, September 1996] who was a magnificent painter.” For the viewer of his work, more so today in fact, Hugh somehow endears himself through his evocative paintings first as a complete stranger then moving through his work he becomes friend, brother, son, lover and nephew.

Gore refers to Steers in his 1995 memoir *Palimpsest* and at the time of the interview discussed how Hugh’s later works sadly “focused on the terror of AIDS, depicting the isolation and horror he experienced with the slow decay of his body.” A bitter reality for many that should never be forgotten or taken for granted.

Steers work has been exhibited at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2013); New

Museum of Contemporary Art (1994); Richard Anderson, New York (1992); Midtown Galleries, New York (1992); Denver Art Museum, Colorado (1991); Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York (1988); and the Drawing Center, New York (1987); among others. Steers' work is in private and public art collections such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center, and the Denver Art Museum. In 1989, Steers received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship. His work was recently featured in the exhibition Art AIDS America curated by Jonathan Katz and Rock Hushka at the Tacoma Art Museum, Washington, in September 2015, traveling to the West Hollywood Library and One Archives Gallery and Museum, Los Angeles, California, the Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, Georgia, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, New York in 2016. A comprehensive monographic catalogue of Steers' work was published by Visual AIDS in 2015.

Vidal further noted in the interview, "He [Hugh] did a series of paintings of families sitting around at dinner tables where everybody's got a paper bag on their head. You remember those pictures," he presses.

Indeed, paper bags are a staple and recurring motif in Steers work. For example, his painting *Raft*, 1991 (oil on canvas, 40 by 30 1/4 inches) recalls bittersweet memories of boyhood; summer camp and an escapist fascination with a flotilla serving as an island for castaways or champions with the shoreline for the everyman just in sight. Steer's subject holds his balance blindly near the edge invoking a sense of doom or unsteady in the fight to stay afloat in the canvas and in life.



Maroon Shed, 1991, oil on canvas, 60 by 60 inches (152.4h by 152.4w cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York • © 2016 Estate of Hugh Steers / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Similarly, *Maroon Shed*, 1991 (oil on canvas, 60 by 60 inches) evokes a specific sense of place as *Raft* in that both present resplendent, sun-drenched greenery with a calming openness through birds-eye perspective. We gaze upon two young men interlaced closely, faces and bodies meld through skillful perceptual technique employed by Steers known as figure ground. A maroon shed alludes to a detached heart while good health and vitality return as realized in earlier or fantasized days. Repeating his top-down vantage point, the scene's mood and subject matter also break free from the claustrophobic tenement confines of his more abundant indoor work. A "lighter" airy moment in Steer's brief departure offers more precise evidence of the artist's noted expressionistic realist style punctuated with short, uniform brush strokes channeling the work of post-Impressionist Van Gogh.

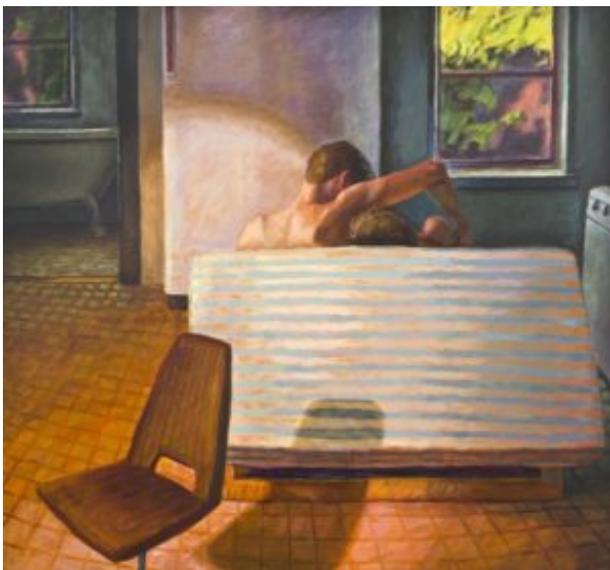
"Steers has an imagination hijacked by history," writes Dale Peck in his essay and introduction

in the lovingly bound posthumous retrospective. “Virtually everything he painted—virtually everything that survives, anyway is a reaction to the disease that was stealing the lives of so many friends and peers, and that would eventually steal his own.”

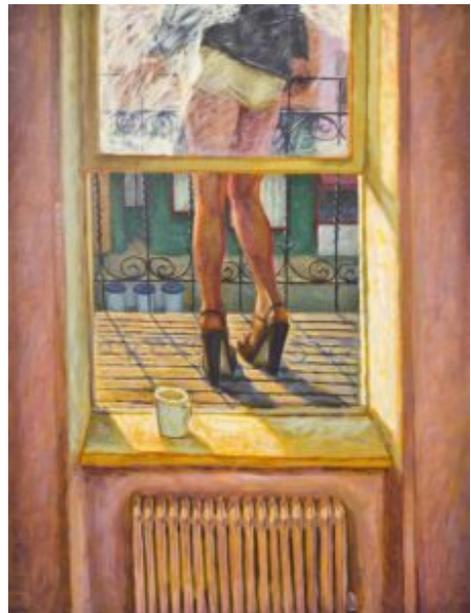
Today, Steers’ masterful remembrances survive to help us recall and mourn if we so choose the darkest days of AIDS through kaleidoscope eyes. The sensuality and fortitude emanating from his work lives on along with those individuals intercepted soon after Steer’s passing through breakthroughs in combination antiretroviral therapies.

In another essay in the monograph penned by Cynthia Carr, she quotes Carl George, a former lover, close friend, and the first, loyal patron of Hugh Steers’ exacting his critical legacy for primarily homosexual males, “tender depictions of gay men in quiet, intimate settings...Hugh did for gay men what they [Balthus, Vuillard, and Bonnard] did for female beauty and sensuality.”

In his preface in the monograph, Visual AIDS Executive Director Nelson Santos ponders the possibilities of the direction that Hugh Steers work might have taken, then sadly points to the fact that we will never know. A moment of speculation followed by introspection reminding us of our great loss in Steer’s work, him as a person along with so many other loved ones creep back into our minds as we ponder our valiant histories through Steer’s gorgeous bleakness.



Futon Couch, 1991, oil on canvas, 56 by 60 inches (142.24h x 152.4w cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York • © 2016 Estate of Hugh Steers / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Morning Terrace, 1992, oil on canvas, 72 by 54 inches (182.88h by 137.16w cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York • © 2016 Estate of Hugh Steers / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

For information about the availability and pricing of the work from the Estate of Hugh Steers log on to Alexander Gray Associates LLC at www.alexandergray.com.

Founded in 1988, Visual AIDS is the only contemporary arts organization fully committed to AIDS awareness and raising issues around HIV today, through producing and presenting visual art projects, while assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS. They are committed to preserving and honoring the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and the artistic contributions of the AIDS movement. For more information about Visual AIDS and Hugh Steers: The Complete Paintings, 1983–1994, log on to www.visualaids.org.