

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

## Hugh Steers Mends Queerness and the Devotional

Working amid the AIDS crisis, Steers's paintings exude a graceful, figurative style that went under-recognized during his brief lifetime.



by **Ksenia M. Soboleva**

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Hugh Steers, "Hospital Bed" (1993), oil on canvas, 61 2/8 x 65 1/8 inches (all images courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers)

Hugh Steers, "Hospital Bed" (1993), oil on canvas, 61 2/8 x 65 1/8 inches (all images courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2021 Estate of Hugh Steers)

Spanning 1987–1993, *Strange State of Being* illustrates that illness by no means negates intimacy. The exhibition, now on view at Alexander Gray Associates, brings together a selection of oil paintings by Hugh Steers, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1987 and died of AIDS-related complications in 1995, when he was only 32 years old. Featuring an array of male nudes in domestic interiors, the works are imbued with grace and elegance, and manifest queer sensuality and devotion in a time marked by unsurmountable loss and neglect.



Installation view of *Hugh Steers: Strange State of Being*, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2021

In “Hospital Bed” (1993), a man holds his lover solemnly, the latter hooked up to an oxygen machine. Their embrace resembles a pietà, and recalls the many parallels that have been drawn between the suffering of Christ and queer martyrdom during the AIDS crisis. The same holds true for “Two Men and a Woman” (1992), in which a naked man lies in a bathtub filled with only a few inches of water. A woman, who likewise radiates a queer sensibility with her mullet-like haircut and button-up tucked into slacks, washes him attentively, her sleeves rolled up. A dark red washcloth glides over his chest, appearing almost like a gaping wound, and yielding a

scene which calls to mind Doubting Thomas, who inserted his fingers into Jesus' wound.

There are a few paintings in which Steers tries to embed a more obvious political message, such as in "Gas Mask" (1992). Featuring a suited businessman wearing the titular mask, the painting's subject is seated comfortably on a chair, an American flag looming behind him. Lacking the intimacy that courses through Steers's practice, these works are less successful.

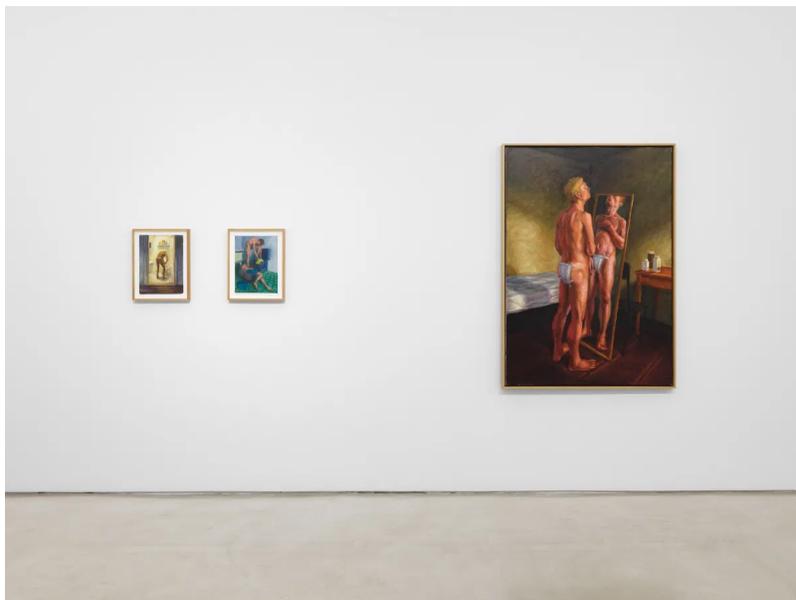


Hugh Steers, "Two Men and a Woman" (1992), oil on canvas, 60 x 57 inches

While clearly inspired by Renaissance imagery, Steers's own aesthetic is undeniably informed by the likes of Pierre Bonnard and Edward Hopper, with a bit of David Hockney sprinkled on top. It's worth noting that practicing figurative painting was frowned on by many at the height of the AIDS crisis, seen by prominent figures like Douglas Crimp as self-indulgent, an act that ran the risk of aestheticizing adversity. Crimp, an art historian and activist, famously wrote in 1987 that "anything said or done about AIDS that does not give precedence to the knowledge, the needs, and the demands of people living with AIDS must be condemned."

And condemned it was, at least in the theory-heavy, conceptually dominated New York art world. As a result, much of the art historical narrative around the AIDS

crisis has come to be defined by activist practices, documentary photography, and conceptual registers for grief and anger. These past few years, however, some room is finally being made for the more literal and emotive representations offered by figurative painting. The work of **Patrick Angus**, for example — another figurative painter who died of AIDS-related complications in 1992 and likewise went under-recognized during his lifetime — has also received more visibility lately.



Installation view of *Hugh Steers: Strange State of Being*, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2021

Interestingly, the particular kind of queer male figurative painting that both Steers and Angus practiced is experiencing a revival (dare one say, renaissance) in our current moment. This fall and winter alone, I have found myself standing in awe in front of works by Louis Fratino, **Salmon Toor**, Anthony Cudahy, and **Doron Langberg**, to name a few. We have always known, of course, that the death of painting is nothing but a myth, but it is refreshing to see such forcibly dormant aesthetic sensibilities resurface into the limelight.

**Hugh Steers: Strange State of Being** continues through April 3 at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan).