

# Alexander Gray Associates

New York  
384 Broadway  
New York NY 10013  
United States  
Tel: +1 212 399 2636  
[www.alexandergray.com](http://www.alexandergray.com)

Germantown  
224 Main Street, Garden Level  
Germantown NY 12526  
United States  
Tel: +1 518 537 2100

Alexander Gray Associates, New York presents *Conjuring Tenderness: Paintings from 1987*, an exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Hugh Steers (1962–1995). The exhibition takes its title from a 1994 quote by the artist: “It’s like conjuring ... It’s as if painting it will make it become real. That painting of a man holding another man is conjuring that tenderness, that hope that someone will still care about you and will be there.” The works on view track subtle, but significant shifts in the artist’s style and subject matter throughout 1987—the year of his positive HIV diagnosis. In this body of work, Steers transforms his relationship to academic portraiture and the human figure, depicting intimate scenes that speak to creative persistence amid tragedy.

Works like *Chess* (1987) capture the increasingly sophisticated painterly realism Steers developed in the service of painting the “nullities of life,” a phrase he borrowed from a 1990 review of a biography of Vincent van Gogh. “So much of art is about the great climactic moment,” Steers explains. “My work is concerned with confronting the horror at existence—the discovery that you may never love someone or get beyond a certain point or realize certain aspirations.” Juxtaposed figures hunched over a chessboard recall the compositional drama of Caravaggio, the restless color of Pierre Bonnard, and the melancholy visual economy of Edward Hopper—a painterly triumvirate Steers encountered at the National Gallery during his childhood in Washington, D.C.

It follows that Steers’s painterly finesse is grounded in art history; he once described his work as “allegorical realism” created “to draw the viewer in through the lure of a comfortingly recognizable style and then confront him with a subject matter of a challenging nature.” Scenes such as those depicted in *Dropping In* (1987) and *Kneeling and Standing* (1987) reference religious iconography and craft compositional hierarchies between the figures. For Steers, traditional narratives offer a shared cultural history to be directly invoked, but immediately disrupted through the use of vibrant color and bodily distortion.

Steers’s figurative scenes define a dramatic sphere both supported and subverted by its domestic surroundings. Lush materials and warm sources of light populate his barren apartments, infusing an evocative romanticism into each spartan interior. Moreover, works such as *Shower Curtain* (1987) and *White Room* (1987) evince the artist’s interest in scenes of bathing and states of undress, a genre common in Renaissance and Baroque art. Related to various themes of affliction, voyeurism, and intimacy, Steers’s bathers remain intentionally ambiguous—only ever partially exposed to the viewer.

Despite the portentous nature of these works—Steers ultimately succumbed to AIDS-related health complications in 1995 at the age of 32—these compositions trace the artist’s commitment to capturing the banal surreality of daily life while also foregrounding his desire for human connection during a time of personal and global tragedy. Reflective of the artist’s state, *Conjuring Tenderness: Paintings from 1987* offers poignant remedies to the loss, isolation, and uncertainty of lives and communities that hang in the balance.

Steers’s paintings have featured in group presentations at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Høvikodden, Norway (2022); RISD Museum, Providence, RI (2021); Denver Art Museum, CO (2020); Museum of the City of New York, NY (2017); Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, GA (2016); The Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY (2016); Alphawood Foundation, Chicago, IL (2016); and Tacoma Art Museum, WA (2015). His work has also been exhibited at ANOTHER SPACE, New York, NY (2023); David Zwirner Gallery, Paris, France (2021); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2013); New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY (1994); Richard Anderson, New York, NY (2000, 1997, 1994, 1993, 1992); and The Drawing Center, New York, NY (1987), among others. Steers’s work is in private and public art collections, including the Denver Art Museum, CO; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Walker Art Center, Minnesota, MN; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, among others. In 1989, Steers received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship. A comprehensive monograph of Steers’s work was published by Visual AIDS in 2015.