

# ARTS

## MAGAZINE

### Hugh Steers

Imagine the grandchildren of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* couple: young adults who've migrated far from the rectitude of their white Midwestern farmhouses, and relocated to closet-sized rooms on New York's Lower East Side. In this motley neighborhood, the myth of "The Great Melting Pot" remains a fact of daily life. Here, claustrophobic apartments feature eclectic furnishings and theatrical lighting in an ensemble that invites a term like American Baroque. Such rooms serve as the settings for Hugh Steers's pictorial dramas, and if Wood's *American Gothic* rendered an embodiment of the nation's superego, Steers paints its id.

The 28-year-old Steers is concerned with the turbulent libidinal depths that seethe beneath a thin-skinned veneer of propriety. Consider *Mask and Mirror*, which depicts a young man sitting before a dressing table. We look down upon the scene, which is flanked by a thick white curtain and dramatic shadows that hang like dark drapes on the tiny room's tilted yellow walls. The spotlight youth holds a mirror, but his gaze is riveted on a white mask grasped in his left hand; the tableau evokes Hamlet musing over Yorick's skull, and the crimson carpet on the floor looks distinctly like blood. The young man's costume is austere but not exactly plain: white blouse, dark skirt, and black high-heeled pumps.

This androgynous image deals with the issues of persona and identity, and Steers's through-the-looking-glass space is telescoped and expanded in ways that characterize perception when emotions are at fever pitch. In *Mask and Mirror*, as elsewhere in Steers's work, an edge of irony acts to temper intensity of feeling. The painter opts for a theatrical mise-en-scène because the theater and psychology (the drama of the mind) share common truths; for instance, one actor can play many roles in life.

Steers's works are based upon imagination and recollection. Under these circumstances, as Gauguin observed, memory can filter out irrelevancies and distill the emotional truth that remains. The notion that style reflects character refers both to the character of the artist and the character of the artist's time. Steers's style weds realism and expressionism, which may be the most effective way to chronicle a nightmarish reality.

A picture like *Blue Towel, Red Tank* wrenches apart space and normative anatomy in order to represent a contemporary

dilemma. A partially clad man in a red tank-top kneels over a recumbent male nude. Their mouths are pressed together in what may be a kiss, or may be the act of artificial respiration. A claw-footed bathtub looms in the background, and a distorted tracery of bathroom tiles ripples beneath the nude body, whose limbs are splayed apart in a gesture that reaches diagonally across the canvas.

The image, which is half-shrouded in shadow, resembles a Thematic Apperception Test. On the basis of uncertain clues, we may choose between multiple interpretations for the moment that we behold. Do we witness the "breath of life," or a kiss of death? Though Steers cites El Greco and Bonnard as masters, his work conjures up an updated version of the anxiety that marked the world of Munch and Strindberg—artists who chronicled another time when death and desire were interlinked.

Several dozen small oils-on-paper look quick but not hasty. Their direct execution suggests the urgency that accompanies the delivery of news in a moment of crisis, or the

need to set down vivid dreams before they fade from memory. Recall Delacroix's advice that a great draughtsman should be able to witness a figure leaping from the third floor of a building and complete a drawing before the body strikes the ground.

Fiction is the lie that tells the truth. In today's world, Steers's symbolically charged paintings—as immediate as headlines and as ambiguous as dreams—come at the terrible truth of AIDS obliquely. His work is simultaneously personal and political because politics becomes personal when life is at stake. Steers's art is melodramatic in the best sense of the term. Forget the mawkish example of soap opera, and think back to the 18th century, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined the term *mélodrame* to signify an art form that could express unspeakably intense emotions. At first, melodrama literally meant melody plus drama: pantomime enhanced by music. The form was aptly described by Eric Bentley in a phrase that could also serve to sum up Steers's artistic vision: "the naturalism of the dream life." (*Midtown, May 9–June 8*)

Gerard Haggerty



Hugh Steers, *Mask and Mirror*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 41" x 41 1/2". Courtesy Midtown Galleries.