

ARTFORUM

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INTERNATIONAL

HUGH STEERS MIDTOWN PAYSON GALLERIES

In Hugh Steers' easel-sized figurative works, a modern theatricality is combined with a sketchy painterly manner reminiscent of old master painting. Stripped down to their underwear and depicted in drab but radiantly lit interiors, Steers' figures appear transfixed by inexplicable gestures. Blank or pensive facial expressions register their alienation, yet the bleak reality depicted in these vignettes is to some extent tempered by the artist's self-conscious black humor.

Steers invites us to share in private moments of anxious suspense or voyeuristic titillation that remain provocatively inexplicit, inducing a state of receptive (perhaps guilty) puzzlement. A work entitled *Party Favors*, 1990, suggests a self-portrait of the artist as comic dunce. Standing full-figure beside a grotesquely knotted drapery, the figure wears a bag over his head topped with a tricolored party hat and limply holds a noisemaker in each hand. In several other works, in which additional figures appear in the roles of social or maintenance workers, campy self-ridicule is replaced by narrative situations that are even more pointedly mysterious. In *Official Letter*, 1990, an accompanying female figure posed with a piece of stationery (her head is again obscured by a paper bag) seems oddly incidental, and cultural artifacts such as a tricolored beach ball and a Jeff Koons-style inflatable rabbit remain undynamic in the context of this static narrative. Despite the formal qualities and a heightened voyeuristic sense that Steers achieves with the repeated motif of the bagged head (a nod to Philip Guston's klansmen), his obtuse art-historical

parodies ultimately function as visual conundrums that isolate the audience from meaningful dialogue.

In this show, Steers pursues two themes. In one body of work, which includes the hooded figures who, like the viewer, experience events they do not see, the images are blandly iconic. In another more explicitly narrative group of paintings, the scenes are both psychologically provocative and erotically titillating. In these works, ambiguity is used to create a sense of personal vulnerability or a mildly sexual atmosphere. In *Red Shorts*, 1990, a young man with shorts about his ankles is partially hidden from view by an easy chair in which he tensely reclines while talking on the phone. This image, simultaneously alienating and erotic, involves the audience in a furtive private experience that recalls the work of Eric Fischl, yet Steers' settings, fitted with wine-dark furniture and symbolically dramatized fixtures, such as bathtubs or refrigerators, are more surrealistic.

The grim realities of illness make demands of art as they do of life, and the most penetrating and accomplished paintings in the exhibit are animated by these concerns. At first glance, *Fruit Bowl*, 1990, provides an ironic glimpse of the studio in which a figure appears to have collapsed in a gothic armoire before a tabletop still life, but closer inspection reveals a small bottle of AZT, the medication commonly used by AIDS patients. In the elegant and unambiguous *Arm Bandage*, 1991, a young man sits on the toilet staring out a viewless window in a

daydream. His elbows rest on his knees, and his averted face leans upon his clasped hands to reveal the prominent IV bandage on his wrist. The elemental beauty of this simple painting provides a momentary release from the desperate circumstances it depicts.

Within their confined environments, Steers' figures reveal an obstreperous spirit that refuses to be overwhelmed by the drama of the scenes depicted. In *White Fridge*, 1990, a cat runs across the floor between a looming refrigerator and a pair of cast-off blue jeans, catching the eye of a man lying on a cot beside a sleeping or unconscious companion. Whether the relationship presented is casually tender or desperately painful, the human image transcends its function as an allegorical symbol.

—Ray Kass



Hugh Steers, *Arm Bandage*, 1991, oil on canvas, 45 x 50 1/2".