

## HUGH STEERS

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In his most recent paintings and smaller oil sketches, Hugh Steers chronicles contemporary urban life haunted by the presence of AIDS. Rendered in an increasingly sophisticated, painterly realism, which at once recalls the compositional drama of Caravaggio, the restless color of Pierre Bonnard, and the melancholy economy of Edward Hopper, Steers' tableaux explore the complexities of living with the fear and reality of AIDS.

A number of Steers' smaller works reveal his penchant for the sketchy brushwork and inviting "slice of life" scenes of French Impressionism. These include the poignant *Paper Cut*, 1991, in which one young man tenderly cares for another's bleeding finger, as well as the gently comical *Warts*, 1992, in which another young man stands in front of a full-length mirror, horrified at the sight of his own, symbolically bandaged, genitalia. Yet these works take on greater significance in the context of the dramatic, large-scale *Throat*, 1991, in which a seated man, wearing only underwear and pumps, holds up a mirror to examine his throat for evidence of disease. For Steers the mirror is a trope for gay identity, an identity that is not only fluid, under construction, but also threatened. The question his protagonists pose to their reflections is no longer "Who am I?" but, rather, "Am I still here?"

In a number of works, Steers knowingly portrays the vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships under siege. In the tragicomic *Harlequin Slip*, 1992, a young man in pumps and a patterned slip sits unhappily facing the viewer, while two men embrace behind him. Less ambiguous, but equally painful, is the pietàlike *Family*, 1992, featuring a man who lies motionless in a bathtub while attended to by his mother and father. The bathtub is also the setting of the monumental *Plastic Embrace*, 1992, in which two nude men move to embrace, symbolically separated by a clear plastic shower curtain. Simultaneously erotic and tragic, desire is shown to be permeated, but not defeated, by fear. In these scenes, Steers is careful to avoid melodramatic cliché. Throughout, he presents a penetrating but always humanistic view of people coping with their mortality.

While Steers' investigation of AIDS targets the domestic arena, and is therefore implicitly political, his characterizations of related political issues are explicit. *Steel Gurney*, 1991, powerfully addresses the current threat to women's reproductive rights: a nude woman lies facing the viewer with her legs spread in the air, while two men in suits attempt to cover her still-visible vagina with an American flag. The white, male politician himself is the subject of the timely, biting comedy *Megaphone*, 1991, in which an automaton in a suit wears headgear that mechanically secures a megaphone to his lips and a flag on the top of his head.

Perhaps the most disturbing work in this show is the large, ambiguous *Baseball Bat*, 1992, which features a young man in a skirt and pumps, wielding a baseball bat and wearing a tee-shirt bearing the American flag. This uneasy mix of identities—both of the gay man and the gay basher—suggests a gay man who is prepared to "bash back." Here Steers conveys the



Hugh Steers, *Plastic Embrace*, 1992, oil on canvas, 72 x 52".

anger that is the common denominator of AIDS-oriented art, from the writings of David Wojnarowicz to the insistently documented histories of Group Material. Ultimately, Steers demonstrates that realistic painting—narrative as well as allegorical—remains a viable mode with which to address the contemporary political landscape. —JPB