

# HUGH STEERS: PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST IN THE EPIDEMIC

by  
Jameson Currier



As long as AIDS exists, art will be created in response to it; how an artist reacts, however, varies greatly and depends on the artist's training, technique, personality, temperament, and life experience within the epidemic. The artists most immediately recognized for their AIDS-related works are those who have been lost because of the disease; Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring, and David Wojnarowicz are three often cited examples.

But AIDS has been a unique catalyst for a generation of artists, whether the individual artist has been diagnosed with HIV or not, and the art AIDS has generated covers a spectrum of sentiments, from the elegiac photographs of Duane Michals, for example, to the politically oriented work of Gran Fury, a collective of artists who sprang out of the ranks of ACT UP in the late 1980s. Among the other artists whose work has been shaped by AIDS are Barton Lidice Benes, Joe Monroe, Louise Fishman, Ellen B. Neipris, John Lindell, Sue Coe, John Sapp, Donald Moffett, Frank Moore, Ross Bleckner, Jo Shane, Kathe Burkhart and Paul Marcus. Critics and art historians often look for trends within the art community, and earlier this year a critic writing in *The New York Times* noted that the AIDS-inspired political and media-oriented art of the 1980s has been increasingly joined by work that is now more personal and metaphorical.

This is acutely apparent in the recent work of Hugh Steers, a 32 year old painter with AIDS, whose evolution as an artist parallels his personal battle with the virus.

"I never had any sort of epiphany," Steers explained to me about his decision to become an artist. We were seated at table at a bright, noisy cafe not far from the loft where Steers paints in Tribeca, enjoying the comfort of an air-conditioning space on one of the blistering days earlier this summer. "There was always pencil and paper around when I was young and I was always drawing something. I also had an art teacher in high school who was a great humanist, and she saw that art wasn't just a place to express yourself, but was also a discipline that involved very hard work. She was a tremendous influence on me."

Discipline is a key element in Steers's approach to his paintings; he works every morning at his loft with at least one day off during the weekends. A graduate of Yale University, Steers also studied at Skowhegan and Parsons, and his agile facility for drawing led him early on into figurative work. His paintings are grounded in both technique and art history, but Steers's style wedds realism with expressionism, revising the tradition of narrative realists by borrowing from the ambitions of abstraction. The results are paintings which are vibrantly beautiful and intimate even though their subject matter — gay life in the era of AIDS — may be, at times, visually unsettling.

Steers earlier works were largely noted for their references and allusions to other artists' works, paintings by such masters as Edvard Munch, Oskar Kokoschka, Jared French, El Greco and Pierre Bonnard. One of Steers paintings completed in 1989, for instance, and titled "Mask and the Mirror,"

*Hugh Steers photographed by Kathryn Clark, 1994.*

shows a young man seated before a dressing table grasping a mirror and a mask, a traditional pose which evokes Hamlet's musing over Yorick's skull.

"There is the argument in contemporary art today that painting is dead, that it's an outmoded means of production to use a 'lit-crit' term," Steers explained, his soft, reserved voice breaking into a more adamant tone. "I always believed why throw out a language that has 500 years of history?"

Steers works in two formats; initially he works on an oil on paper sketch and then those ideas are worked up as a large oil on canvas painting. "My work used to be more allegorical, obvious and didactic," he said. "Now I'm much more open to what life really is, but I'm also striving to be more poetic — it's like the images are metaphors that come from very specific needs and things on my part."

Steers's paintings, however, became more graphic about sexuality and illness following the artist's hospitalization in 1991 for pneumonia. "I think a lot of the art that's been done around AIDS is very clinical — it comes from an idea. I believe very strongly that art — as Wallace Steven said — needs to resist the intelligence almost successfully. I believe that whatever you do — if you're an artist — has to be highly informed intellectually. But when you're actually painting — it doesn't come from the mind, it comes from the senses, but once it's out there the mind comes in and refines it."

The afternoon I met with Steers, this tall, willowy, brown-eyed and boyish-looking artist talked animatedly about his work that morning on a new "Hospital Man" painting. So far, Steers has completed eight paintings with this reoccurring character, and he hopes to arrange a showing of these related works this fall at the Richard Anderson Gallery in Soho. In one of his earlier paintings, "Man & IV," "Hospital Man" is modeled on a tradition of power figures from European paintings. Dressed in a short baby-doll type of hospital gown, this slender, elegant man displays a set of long, androgynous legs supported by white high heels; the hand-on-the-hip pose the man affects is similar to the figures in such historical works by Velazquez and Van Dyck. Instead of holding a scepter as his historical counterpart would, the "Hospital Man" has an IV stand. Instead of a throne room, the setting is a hospital bed with a checkered tile floor.

"I really feel like these hospital paintings are affecting my life as I make them by helping me accept my own sexuality and my illness," Steers was quoted in a recent issue of *Art in America*.

After he has completed working out the idea and images for a painting, Steers spends approximately five to seven days on the process of painting the canvas, then allows the canvas to sit around for a few more days before he is finished with the painting. "I keep looking at it and then I figure out something, or if something bothers me then I change it," he said. "There are no great deadlines, though. I keep working all the time, I'm very steady."

Throughout our conversation, I sensed that Steers was uncomfortable talking about his work in a theoretical sense.

*Hugh Steers, "Man and IV", oil on canvas, 65" x 47", 1994.*

His manner, however, lightened as he explained his enjoyment of pop culture, and its influence on his work. Steers mentioned that he loves going to movies and watching television to relax, but added that they can also be one of many sources of ideas for him. One of his recent works, for example, a large-scaled painting titled "Urinals" was inspired by the case of Allen Schindler, the gay sailor who was beaten to death by a shipmate. In the painting, a public lavatory is rendered in plunging perspective. The fallen figure recalls Manet's "Dead Toreador." Certain details, such as the sagging shapes of the urinals were derived from documentary photos of the crime scene.

"I'll see some ad, one of those Caribbean things — couples kissing on a beach," Steers noted, "and it'll move into a painting like 'Catheter Kiss.'" That painting, also a recent one, portrays two nude men lying in a hospital bed. One of them has a catheter entering his chest and the other man kisses the point of entry. The image, in effect, sustains an erotic nature within the boundaries of illness. "That's a kiss, too," Steers said, quite proudly, "but no one has seen that kind of kiss before." In another recent "Hospital Man" painting, one man is shown holding a razor. Steers explains the image came to him after listening to a song titled "Don't You Have Someone to Die For."

The greatest influence on his art, of course, has been his own life, particularly his own sexuality and illness. "The whole





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

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AIDS thing is so peculiar and complicated and vast," he told *Art in America*. "It's tied in with sex and one's perception of oneself and desire. I'm trying to touch on all of this in my paintings."

"An explicitly sexual image is a very tricky thing because it immediately names itself and isolates itself as this one thing," Steers said to me as I leaned across the table to be better able to hear him when two customers settled into the table beside us. "The fact that someone is not comfortable about that lets the rest of the painting sort of wash over them. People have problems getting beyond those things. I just think that light, or censoring myself, is just a strategy for being heard, and making a point — a more profound point — coming out of an explicit sexual scene. An artist must earn the right to do those things, though. The technique has to be there and your whole sense of narrative and image has to be highly developed. A lot of artists haven't earned the right to be daring."

The expansion of sexuality within Steers's work has created a bit of controversy for the artist. Early on in his career Steers was represented by an uptown Manhattan gallery, Midtown Payson, but left the gallery when his work became more focused and tougher, particularly on gender issues. "Of course I was bitter," Steers added with an edgy laugh. "But I understood the facts. It was a midtown gallery with a huge overhead and my work is very difficult. Even if they sold my show out it wouldn't pay for itself. I'm very grateful that they gave me a chance, but I think they misunderstood what I was doing, and, as it became clearer what I was doing, they could deal with it less."

Steers was taken on by Richard Anderson, whose new second floor gallery in Soho seems more suited, physically and spiritually, to the artist's paintings. But controversy for Steers does not end there. Last year, a trustee of the Denver Museum resigned due to a heated battle over acquiring one of Steers' paintings for the museum, in part, because some of the board members felt the depiction of an American flag within the painting was unpatriotic.

"There are certain issues that I'm constantly refining," Steers answered in response to my question of how he sees his emotions coloring his paintings. Around us the noise of the cafe had abated some; the office lunch crowd was disappearing back to their offices. "Basically gender, identity, individualism, illness, where culture and instinct clash," he listed for me. "That's why the bathroom motif keeps showing up." As he explained in *Art in America*, "We shit and piss and get sick and throw up and then we wash ourselves and we're naked there before we throw on all the signifiers. And there's the incredible fact that in the bathroom we've created all this sculpture for depositing our waste."

Among the other reoccurring motifs in Steers's recent works are shoes, particularly high heels. "Shoes like that are an amazing thing," he said, his voice, once again, delightedly excited. "They are so structured and there's an architectural quality to them. They're culture run wild, and yet they're linked to a very sexual quality."

At the emotional heart of Steers's paintings are the issues of illness. Finding out that he was HIV-positive led Steers to

throw out all distractions within his work. As he mentioned in *Connoisseur* magazine, "I've tried to turn the disease into an opportunity, by asking what insights it gives me into living and confronting mortality."

"I pretty much suspected I was positive all along," Steers explained, "because someone I slept with several times died in 1982 — so I kind of figured I had it. Then another friend of mine got sick and then I got the test in '87."

"You name it," he replied, ironically smiling when I asked what medications he had tried, listing among his answers AZT and ddI. "My body seems to tolerate everything pretty well. But I'm always dealing with parasites."

"I think it's crucial that in the hospital or outside that you be very involved and on top of your care," Steers stressed. "I think that psychologically plays off your physical well being." He also noted, "You have to chose what you believe in, if you believe in holistic stuff, fine. I realized that I just couldn't get my mind into it. I chose to believe in Western medicine, but I also take a lot of vitamins."

"I'm a gastronomic mess right now, but the name of the game is keeping my weight on. Eating is some problem, because I've lost my appetite. Whether it's from the drugs or the virus, I don't know, but I just have to shove stuff down my face. You do what you can do."

"Illness is such a crucial subject," Steers stated in *Art in America*. "Everyone, especially in America, has a horror of it and an obsession with cleanliness and mortality, when only a

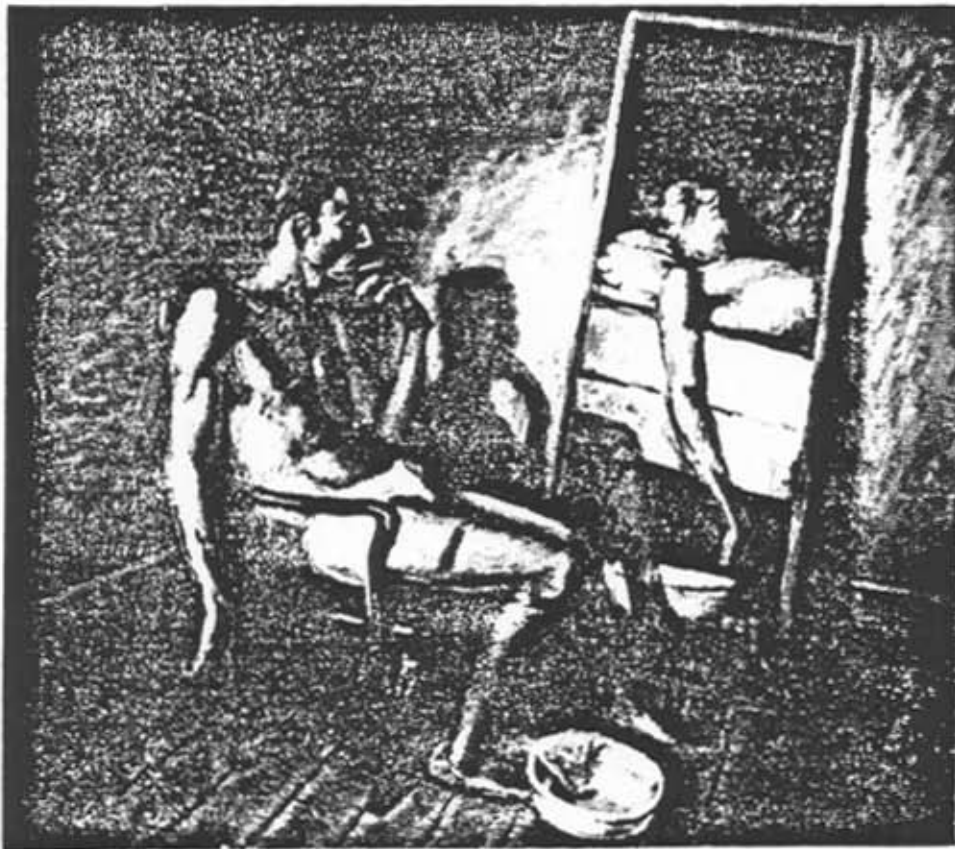
hundred years ago people caught a cold and died. It is all part of my having to deal with having AIDS. How do I embrace this thing and make it OK or make myself able to live with it and produce and go on from there? How do I live every day with despair."

Although Steers's work has become more focused and refined because of his illness, the artist does not consider himself an activist. "I did ACT UP when it started out and I went to the big NIH demonstration, but I'm not good in groups. I'm also not very good at anger, and it's not a very helpful force for me. I have to come to terms with that, and what I can do, and what I can do is my work."

As we cleared our table and prepared to head back out into the sweltering heat, Steers had some final thoughts on the subject of anger. "I don't think anger is a very objective place to start. Early on, I would be angry and do something, the Schindler painting grew out of that — you're just shocked and horrified by man's inhumanity to man. But anger is very specific and tends to be heavy in its outcome and I'm just more sort of astonished and full of wonder — especially in relation to what we do to each other and why we do it. Anger blinds you to the facts of your work. Rage is distorting, and reality is distorted and twisted enough." □

Jameson Currier is the author of *Dancing on the Moon: Short Stories about AIDS*, published by Penguin, and the documentary film, *Living Proof: HIV and the Pursuit of Happiness*.

Hugh Steers, "Yellow Washcloth", oil on canvas, 54" x 62", 1992.



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