

## Hugh Steers: A Memoir

Yesterday, while getting ready for work, I saw a segment on the morning news in which different fashion luminaries were asked to redesign the conventional hospital gown. The results were rather extraordinary. The first design had been done in lingerie red satin, the second splashily printed with racing cars, and a third took the form of a “swing” dress accented by a short train which doubled, in the words of the designer, as a “privacy flap.” It seemed a ghoulish enterprise, this idea of couture hospital gowns—but at the same time awfully funny. I wished, as I watched the segment, that Hugh Steers were still around to share it with me, because he would have understood and enjoyed it more than anyone I know.

Hugh (1962–1995) was a talented and technically accomplished painter. He studied art at Hotchkiss and Yale, where he was inspired by his work with artist Julie Heffernan. He was graduated from Yale in 1985 with high honors and a solo exhibition of his work, and within two years had been included in a group show at the Drawing Center. One year after that he was showing at two well-known Manhattan galleries and at the Albright-Knox in Buffalo. In 1991 and 1992, the Midtown Gallery (soon to become Midtown Payson) gave him two one-man shows, the second of which was accompanied by a full-color catalogue featuring an exceptionally glamorous photo of the artist in all his youthful glory.

From his first exhibition in New York, Hugh showed work that was designed (in his own words) “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.” The early images were not as explicitly sexual as the ones he made at the end of his career, but they dealt with the AIDS-related issues of loneliness and alienation, as well as with the nightmarish terror of being shut away in a sickroom while the body slowly fails. Hugh’s undergraduate work was never quite so unsettling; his works from 1985 and 1986 feature conventional portraits and a few pictures of naked male couples sharing a bathroom: typical M.F.A. work, I would have thought, by a talented young man just coming to terms with his sexuality.

In 1987, after receiving a call from his sick friend Michael Fenna, Hugh discovered he himself was infected with HIV. Hugh had known a number of people who were suffering from AIDS and in some ways was ready for the news. When I visited him in the hospital shortly before his death, he told me that after learning of his infection

he cried himself to exhaustion, then got up, ate some chocolate cake, and went out to the Frick to look at the paintings there. Art was, in some ways, all that he had left.

I had heard of Hugh long before I met him or saw any of his work; I had artist friends who had gone to Yale with him and were impressed and perhaps a little envious of his success at Midtown. But they were responding not to his paintings but to his success—not to the work but to the photos in *Interview* and *Vanity Fair*—and I heard of him not as a talented painter but as someone my own age who had “made it” as an artist. I don’t know if anyone was aware of his HIV status by that point; thematically, even his second show referred only obliquely to AIDS, with, for example, a young man in one painting sitting at a vanity table holding a death’s-head mask, or (in another) trying to decide between two different bottles of prescription medicine. The paintings in the show at Midtown were just as violent and disturbing as the ones he would paint later on, but they concerned themselves with more universal scenarios of alienation and loss, featuring female and male-female couples. AIDS, tragic and unsightly as it was, gave Hugh a much more specific subject for his work.

My own first encounter with Hugh’s work was not at Midtown, but at a 1992 group show called “Love Gone Bad” at Richard Anderson Fine Arts. I wasn’t immediately won over by what I saw, though I do remember feeling that Hugh’s work was different from anything else I was seeing on my rounds as an art reviewer. The painting included in that exhibition (*Cobalt Heels*, now in the collection of Lock Whitney) was of the lower half of a man in women’s high heels, discarded workboots at his feet, standing before an unmade bed. It was a portentous scene, too heavy-handed in its symbolism for my taste, but still, the image lingered in my mind—it’s always nice to see good figurative representational painting, and the colors were rather extraordinary, particularly the orange coverlet which was slipping off the bed. I soon learned you could always tell Hugh’s painting from his very distinctive palette: the work almost always featured hot, dark, complicated colors.

My biggest problem with that picture, in retrospect, was the subject matter. I wondered why, given the depth and variety of sexual experience available to a gay man in New York, this Hugh Steers should be so stuck on the image of a man in high heels. Drag—as symbolized by those cobalt heels—was, I thought, at the very least outdated; at worst, a confused form of self-expression—a burlesque (part-contemptuous, part-adulatory) of strong and scary women. To my mind it was all rather silly, or at least something I didn’t want to have to think about, particularly since, unlike the exuberant drag I’d seen at events like Wigstock or clubs like La Escuelita, there seemed to be something so terribly lonely and cut-off about Hugh’s drag queens. So I set *Cobalt Heels* aside, unsure what the artist was getting at and disturbed by the image for reasons I couldn’t quite understand. Simultaneously, Hugh established himself in my mind as an artist to watch. I didn’t know what he was getting at, but after a week or so, I knew that it interested me. I knew this because I couldn’t get the picture out of my mind.

With his appearance in “Love Gone Bad,” Hugh had just begun the process of leaving his uptown gallery, Midtown. Midtown was a very good gallery and had treated him well; two solo shows in two years, plus catalogue, are rare indulgences, even for

the established artists of Fifty-seventh Street. But Hugh was under a great deal of pressure as a young art star and I think he felt that the responsibilities of showing with Payson were somewhat suffocating. In the end, there was a difference of opinion, reportedly about the quality of the paintings, and Hugh left Midtown for Richard Anderson.

Perhaps it was just as well. Hugh's sexually symbolic themes were better served by the more politically charged downtown environment, and it was certainly a place where his painterly ability stood out. Hugh was shrewd about such things—or else (at the very least) well informed. As well he ought to have been. He had an exceptional family background: Gore Vidal was his uncle, Jacqueline Onassis his step-aunt, Louis Auchincloss his godfather. Celebrity was something he'd lived near for most of his life, and as a keen observer not only of his family but of the art world, Hugh saw that it was not enough simply to be good, or good at what one did; one must also be a sort of politician, presenting a specific version of oneself for public consumption. So while working on his paintings, Hugh also worked hard at composing his own star persona—a difficult task, I think, considering his essential nature, which was shy, quiet, and aloof.

Then again, anyone who knew Hugh knew that he had a strong and often hilarious fantasy life, one in which he identified with sexually imposing supermodels like Linda Evangelista and tempestuous divas like Callas. I think it was this double awareness he had of experience—first as a withdrawn young man who kept the world determinedly at a distance, then as a strong and sexually mesmerizing fantasy-woman who was afraid of absolutely nothing—that guided him in his everyday life and eventually became the subject of so much of his work. Hugh Steers the Art Star was, essentially, a diva-like image Hugh constructed and maintained to protect and speak for the hard-working artist within. And as his personal life was destroyed by his own illness and the deaths of his friends, as Hugh began to live more in his fantasies and in his art, this diva-image became a sort of imaginary best friend, a guardian angel and an alter-ego through whom he could express both his rage and his desire to escape.

The first time I met Hugh was in 1992; he came to an all-boy party at my apartment featuring frozen margaritas and men's Olympic figure skating on TV. Richard Anderson brought him. I didn't connect the person I met with the painter I'd heard about; Hugh seemed nice, but hardly glamorous—tall and thin, yes, but nervous and uncomfortable, hardly the sort of person who would stare out imperiously from the pages of *Vanity Fair* magazine. Still, when the skating competition began and I wondered aloud what the difference was between a toe loop and a lutz, Hugh turned to me and explained the two jumps to perfection: he knew, he said, because had been a figure skater once. In an instant he went from being diffident and standoffish, to totally accessible and engaged. I decided then and there that I liked him.

Over the next few years, Hugh and I continued to cross paths, but we never really sought each other out. I remember seeing him at Theater 80 St. Marks once, at a Dietrich movie, I think. And he could often be found at art openings. When he was given the Project Room at NYU's Grey Art Gallery, I stopped by to look in, and we had a nice talk. Hugh's work was becoming much more intimate, now

featuring subjects clearly suffering from AIDS, and yet there was a dark, loopy sense of humor in the work that kept it just this side of bearable. The images were full of pain and anger, but somehow they were more than mere diatribes against illness. They were about an emotional condition that was affected by illness but somehow stood apart from it.

After Hugh's 1993 exhibition I decided I wanted to write an extended piece about his paintings, and so visited him at his studio. Hugh had been on-again off-again sick, but he received me graciously and showed me his recent sketches and a few larger paintings. Over coffee he explained that as his body became more frail he had neither the patience nor the stamina to do the more highly finished paintings he had shown earlier in his career. When I suggested to him that the less finished work had a drama and raw energy all its own, he seemed relieved.

We discussed composition a little. Hugh mentioned that while he used to do his modelling from life, he had recently begun making use of photography, and was relying more upon his imagination these days since he never really knew if he'd have the strength to paint from the model for an entire session. Moreover, he was learning to trust his imagination for subjects. "I think now that it's better to paint from your head," he observed. "Sometimes life only confuses."

I remember being surprised at the studio: it was a tiny, brightly lit room in a loft building, with none of the dank, gloomy personality of the interiors Hugh usually painted. I was even more surprised to realize that Hugh did not live in the East Village, but rather on West Fourteenth Street. Could it be, I wondered, that Hugh did not actually live the life he described in his paintings? When I questioned him on the subject, Hugh did not tell me that for a long time he had lived and worked in a small apartment in Alphabet City, or that he had used the interior of that apartment in many of his works. It may be that through his reticence he was prompting me to realize that art works create worlds of their own, and that an apartment interior like the one he described over and over again in his paintings can be a metaphor for a certain state of mind, not just the depiction of an actual space.

As it happened, the article I was hoping to write for *Artforum* was never published; Jack, the editor, felt that Hugh was getting very close to a breakthrough, and wanted to wait for that breakthrough before giving him a full page in the magazine. I was disappointed, but I also understood; and in retrospect Jack may have been right, since the last group of paintings Hugh showed were the most exciting ever, and the ones which will, I think, define him for future generations. At the same time, the paintings of this "middle period" seem very important to me.

The overall sensibility of the paintings was one of self-awareness: each face and body quietly possessed by a sense of its own dignity and, at times, absurdity. Hugh's subjects went about their apartment activities with a wonderful solemnity, despite (or perhaps because of) their taste for stylish dresses or impressive heels. Despite the emptiness and isolation of their environment, each was somehow engaged in a solemn performance, a serious act of play.

These performances took on deeper significance thanks to the roughly expressive nature of the painting and the distinctive combination of darkened spaces and intense

colors under glaring artificial light, which gave them a psychological intensity similar to that in the boxing-ring paintings of George Bellows. Like Bellows, Hugh was intent on portraying a complex and highly charged emotional state—in this case, not murderous rage, but rather exhaustion, loneliness, and the nervous laughter and desperate camp which can comfort people suffering psychic anguish. And again, as in Bellows, the scene Hugh described was so important that he returned to it again and again. That same interior; that same scary emptiness.

Perhaps the most upsetting thing about so many of the pictures is the “unfinished” nature of the faces, which often resemble those of corpses, or automata, or street thugs. Hugh often employed raw, ugly color and clumsy brushwork in just the place one would expect something more tender and considerate. The result is visually unsettling in a highly expressive way: as if Hugh were balancing an inner impatience and rage with his overall desire to communicate through traditionally finished images.

It’s hard to understand why so many of the scenes depict such absurd situations (a man in pumps poised atop a toilet bowl, for instance, changing a light bulb; or a solitary figure performing a drag striptease to an empty room). Clearly this isn’t just painting from life. Could it be, then, that each of these is a sort of allegorical composition: a story, that is, of a certain type of existence reduced to a single extraordinary image? I think that another way to consider these works is as a sort of visual poetry, describing not just what it looks like to be sick with AIDS, but rather the emotional state of a person living with AIDS: what it feels like to be inside that body from day to day, trying to assert one’s own personhood as the disease runs its course. What Hugh realized about his situation and captured so brilliantly in his paintings is not the shock of realizing one’s own mortality but rather those more immediate, in-between moments of loneliness, bewilderment, and paranoia, as well as outright eccentricity. By portraying the domestic and the commonplace—actions as banal as changing a light bulb or moving from chair to bed—and including some erotically charged detail—a platform wedge, a satin cape—he reminds us that disease itself is a secondary concern, a by now long-familiar circumstance rather than the immediate cause of drama. Moreover, he suggests that (whatever his fellows are up to) there’s a complex emotional conflict going on here: beyond mere anger, a lingering desire for something transcendent; below the outer layer of bitterness, a core of romantic longing.

By depicting men who, though sick, were still resolutely sexual in the most unexpected ways, Hugh was daring to introduce comedy and absurdity into the story of living a slow death. This seemed to me to be a high-stakes sort of exhibitionism, and as such it created an eerie, brave, and wonderfully idiosyncratic narrative.

For a while, Hugh and I didn’t see each other. Still, I always thought him delightful company, and was always glad to run into him. So when I met him in the spring of 1994 at an *Artforum* lecture and invited him out for a hamburger, I was glad he was able to accept. In fact, I was a little surprised—in my mind, at least, Hugh was always on his way to some exclusive dinner party surrounded by a crowd of well-groomed young men in expensive suits; I didn’t think of him as a person who could be available on short notice for a hamburger.

Hugh was much thinner than I remembered; he was having trouble with his digestion,

and chemotherapy had speeded up his metabolism, so that he seemed even more nervous than usual during the course of our meal, though not at all unhappy. His work was getting much more attention these days, he said, and whenever he could manage it he was in his studio, painting.

We sat in the non-smoking section of a bar near the Drawing Center and drank ice water with our burgers. Our talk was mostly about art, and it was a good conversation, not just the average daily gossip. Hugh was always excited about what was going on in the art world. He had great powers of observation, and a sense of humor that was cold and dry and effervescent. It could really sneak up on you. I remember laughing a lot that night. Hugh was never gossipy or unkind, but I wouldn't have wanted to be on his bad side. As I say, he missed nothing.

That night I had only a vague sense of Hugh's family background. To show too much interest in it conversationally seemed rude. A year or so after his death, however, I came across a memoir published by Hugh's uncle, which made some of its complexity more comprehensible to me.

Gore Vidal's *Palimpsest* begins with the 1957 wedding of Hugh's mother, Gore Vidal's half-sister. Nina ("Nini") Gore Auchincloss was marrying Hugh's father, Newton ("Newt") Steers, a "businessman-professor, twenty years older than the bride." Nini's stepsister, Jacqueline Kennedy, was matron of honor at that event, which was otherwise dominated by Gore's (and Nini's) mother, Nina Gore Vidal Auchincloss Olds. Several years later, Nina would testify against her daughter during her divorce from Newt Steers, saying Nini was an unfit mother.

The Steers' wedding reception was held at Merrywood, home of Nina Gore Vidal Auchincloss Olds' ex-husband Hugh Dudley Auchincloss and his new wife, Janet Lee Bouvier Auchincloss. In the memoir, the new Mrs. Auchincloss trades insults with Gore Vidal while, somewhere upstairs, "Jackie [Kennedy] hitched up her gown and showed the innocent Nini how to douche post-sex . . . [for] although the bidet was known in those days, no proper house contained one." This bizarre image, from the first page of the memoir, seems to me to resonate with so many of Hugh Steers's own images—images of bathrooms and of caricatured femininity. Sex is ever-present but, at the same time, an ellipsis. Love is much less important than money or status; in fact, it barely seems to exist as an idea. The women of this world are strong-willed and eccentric, dissatisfied and comically mean.

My evening meal with Hugh ended on an interesting note. Somehow the conversation turned to our early experiences in New York, particularly New York nightclubs, and Hugh observed that he had been going out to nightclubs since his middle teens. I asked how that could be, since he'd grown up in DC and then been sent to boarding school. He smiled, then admitted that while still at Hotchkiss he had taken the bus down from Lakeville "to appear as Callas at the Anvil." It sounded like an outrageous performance by any standard, but even more astounding when one considered that Callas's great rival, Jackie Onassis, was Hugh's step-aunt. It was then, I think, that I began to understand Hugh's preoccupation with drag. More than mere fun, it had something to do with rage, and something to do with family, and

something to do with sex. But more than anything it was a fantasy of empowerment through desirability.

As I've said, the first painting I'd seen by Hugh was a picture of man in high heels. By Hugh's final show, last fall, most of the paintings concerned similar subjects: the spectral figure of a man dressed in hospital gown and matching platform shoes, or platform sandals, or sling-backed pumps, either standing beside, stepping around, or flying over men succumbing to illness. I went to the opening of that show, and had been mesmerized by the figure, not really knowing what it was or what it might mean, so much so that I went up to Hugh right then and there and, after congratulating him, asked him who she was. He said, in that offhand, lighthearted way he had, "Oh, that's my new superhero. I invented him. I call him 'Hospital Man.'"

When I asked what "Hospital Man" did, Hugh couldn't really say, except to note that he had become aware of the presence and strength and safety of this character during his own intermittent hospital stays. There was a dark and aggressive sort of humor to "Hospital Man"—the outrageous heels, the *haute-couture* "swing" hospital gown, the fashionable presence striking poses near the deathbed—and at the same time, a resemblance to Hugh himself. Again, I wasn't quite sure I could put into words what Hugh was getting at, but this time I knew he'd expressed himself perfectly.

In February, Richard Anderson called to tell me that Hugh was in St. Vincent's Hospital and that he was probably going to die within the week. He asked me to come down from Amherst College, where I was writing a book, to discuss Hugh's painting with him one last time and perhaps just say goodbye. I think Richard hoped that by speaking to Hugh about his work, I would somehow inspire him to get better. I agreed to drive down at once.

Hugh was in a semi-private room in the AIDS ward, and he had the bed next to the door. He was extremely thin and pale, and his hair was gone, and he was propped up in bed wearing a hospital gown. Seeing him, I had a sense of *déjà-vu*—as if I'd somehow entered one of his paintings. He had to squint before he could recognize me—his eyesight had deteriorated—and I knew within our first minute together that he was slipping away. He spoke in a voice so low that I could barely hear him. And he had a form of brain cancer, which combined with the medications he was taking was inhibiting his ability to concentrate, so he would forget words constantly, or else stop in mid-sentence, unable to remember what he'd been talking about. The problem was compounded by the extraordinary number of interruptions and loud noises that surrounded us—visitors coming and going, the patient in the next bed talking inane on the telephone, nurses and orderlies stopping by to check Hugh's chart, collect his tray, take his temperature. "I don't know what's worse," he told me, "This—or Homeboy Health Care." When I asked what he meant, he described the health attendant he'd had for a while, an eighteen-year-old Hispanic muscleboy who'd walked around Hugh's apartment with his walkman on at full blast, pretending Hugh didn't exist. It was a horrible image, but Hugh's way of presenting it was so precisely focused—all that rage and pain so prettily wrapped up in humor—that I couldn't help smiling. I remember I was trying hard not to let Hugh know that seeing him in such a sad

state was making me terribly upset, and I wanted him to understand that I was very grateful to him for the laugh.

I tried to speak with Hugh for a while about his painting, but he wasn't interested. He wasn't even trying to draw anymore, he said. He was simply too tired. There was no pleasure in it. After realizing that further conversation on the subject of art was pointless, I simply fell to talking with him about life.

Hugh's life seems, in retrospect, a continuation of the same family story laid out by his uncle in *Palimpsest*. He recounted it to me that day in the hospital in a similarly outrageous and detached mode. Hugh remembered his father to me as "witty, intelligent, and emotionally inexpressive," a man who disappeared early and whose basic problem, so far as the family was concerned, was that he "had no money." As for Nini, Hugh merely observed, "she's been described to me as a seductive narcissist." He seemed to think his uncle Gore's dislike of her was entirely reasonable. She had treated Hugh badly, he said, and he was angry about what had happened to him in childhood, but at the same time he loved her deeply, and was reconciled to the fact that she would not be present for his final illness.

Hugh remembered his childhood to me as a drama which centered entirely on his mother, her worries about money, and her battles with his stepfather; she had convinced him, he said, that "we were always on the edge of being thrown out without a penny." Hugh's closest relationship was with his governess, he said. He didn't say much more, except to note that while he had thought about suicide constantly as a child, he had never attempted it. His escape from home was through sex. He became sexually active, he said, as soon as he was able to drive a car.

Hugh knew he was close to death and had no fear of it. He knew from his doctor that it wasn't going to be any more painful than anything he'd already been through. He was frustrated, though, that he had to wait for death to come: he just wanted it to be over. A difficult thing to talk about, to be sure, but he was very straightforward. "The only thing I really regret," he said, "is that I've never had a real relationship. That's something I sorely miss."

"Sorely miss." I wrote that down, because it sounded so much like something out of a book.

After a while he talked about his family, describing the reconciliation he'd had with his mother earlier that year, after sending her a letter laying out once and for all the grievances he'd harbored against her since childhood. He spoke appreciatively of his uncle Gore, who had seen him through the financial difficulties brought on by illness, and of his brother and uncle, who were helping him close up his studio and apartment and take care of his affairs. Finally he mentioned his good friend Jay Swanson, who was also going to be the executor of his estate. Sometime earlier Jay had stopped by, as he did whenever Hugh was in the hospital, to check on him and see that everything was okay. That afternoon, he brought Hugh a pair of warm socks. It seemed to me a very good gift.

Finally, after about three hours, Hugh seemed to be getting tired, and I decided it was time to leave. Hugh thanked me for coming, and said he needed to use the



bathroom. He swung his legs out from under the blanket and stood up. He looked so impossibly frail. But standing there before me, he also looked ridiculously elegant: with those long legs and that absurdly short, swingy hospital gown, he really might have been a supermodel—Christy or Linda or Kate. I wanted to hug him, but in typical Hugh fashion, he kept me at arm's distance, and instead leaned forward, brushing first one cheek, then another, in a simple, formal embrace. Then he went into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

That was how we said goodbye.