

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

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Hugh Steers

Through July 20. Alexander Gray Associates, 510 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-399-2636, alexandergray.com.



Hugh Steers's "Poster," from 1990, in the show *The Nullities of Life* at Alexander Gray Associates.

2018 Hugh Steers/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates, New York

In Hugh Steers's painting "Poster" (1990), a man sits at a desk with blank paper in front of him and his face turned away from the viewer. Leaning on his arm, he stares wistfully at a poster in the corner of the room with a pink triangle and the word "death" on it — a reference to the "Silence=Death" emblem of AIDS activism. The poster lies near a theatrical red curtain, beyond which stands an empty canvas on an easel. The composition visualizes a fundamental quandary: What do you do if you believe that silence is oppressive, but you're not entirely sure what to say?

Mr. Steers died of AIDS in 1995 when he was only 32. In his short time as an artist he found a way to express the everyday intimacies and struggles of being a gay man during the early years of the epidemic. He referred to these moments as “the nullities of life,” as this exhibition is titled, after a phrase he read in a review of a biography of Vincent van Gogh. Mr. Steers had an incredible talent for imbuing those nullities with significance.

The 13 paintings here are all set in domestic spaces. Men often appear in pairs, helping each other eat or dress or lying in bed. Their expressions, if we can see them, are muted: They neither laugh nor cry, but rather look and think, projecting a weary tenderness. Mr. Steers uses light to heighten the drama; many of his figures have an almost saintly glow. Each scene seems to represent both its particulars and something bigger — the quotidian reality of a painful moment in history.

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