

"Art in itself isn't very interesting," declares painter and PWA Hugh Steers.

Art



HUGH'S HUES: Steers and his painting Hand (1994).

suited to dealing with something like this. I thought about death from early on. Somehow, having AIDS slipped easily into my life narrative. I'm not saying it's easy, but my understanding of myself accepted it easily."

In the irradiated light of a Hugh Steers painting, a confusion of emotions exists in a plane of continually shifting realities. Forging an alliance between soulful reverie and hard-earned wisdom, he puts our most personal exchanges on a knife-edge between the suffering and the silly—an art in itself. Working in an arena he calls "alle-

gorical realism," Steers employs bravura brushwork, stark, theatrical lighting, and naturalistic body language to achieve a lunatic sense of angst that carries his painting far beyond mere sentimentality. The group of new canvases on view this month at the Richard Anderson Gal-



ERIK A. HARTWICK

## Palette Initiative

IT'S HARD TO KNOW where to look first at a Hugh Steers painting. Do you peer into the midnight-oil glow of his sickrooms? Or peek up the dress of a bare-assed figure he calls Hospital Man? Often the temptation is simply to look away. Steers captures people at moments so private it's almost intrusive. It's not just that some of his figures are sick or even that they're dying. The trouble is, they're sexy.

"Just because you're sick," says Steers, "doesn't mean you don't have a libido." He should know; it's a state of affairs he's been dealing with since 1987, when he first tested positive for HIV; in 1991 he was diagnosed with AIDS. Since then he has focused his subtly old-masterish, Expressionist style on issues of mortality, isolation,

and identity, and given them a vitality often missing from AIDS-related work. "This isn't 'AIDS art,'" Steers insists, dismissing the term as "a marketing tool." He sees his work relating more generally to illness and incompleteness, where AIDS is only one particular. He admits the work can be difficult to take, but he's not concerned with only making pretty pictures. "Art in itself isn't very interesting," he declares. "What's interesting is how art engages our humanity."

Steers, 32, is definitely engaged. A Connecticut Yankee by way of Maryland (and the nephew of Gore Vidal), he is a slight, soft-spoken, thoughtful man who clearly enjoys the provocations of his art and approaches his illness with unusual equanimity. "In an odd way," he explains, standing in his Manhattan studio, "I've always been

lery in New York includes several portraits of Hospital Man. In his flimsy baby-doll hospital gown and platform shoes, he becomes "a superhero fighting for the sexual rights of the sick." Steers portrays him as unequivocally trapped in the isolation of his illness and unalterably defiant in the face of death.

Steers is also deeply concerned with the moral obligations of an artist. He may poke fun at the gym-driven "physique fascism" that dominates the lives of many homosexuals, but he also has an intimate understanding of his own mortal wounds. "If something happens, it happens," he says matter-of-factly. "I don't waste time worrying about it." —LINDA YABLONSKY

Linda Yablonsky has contributed to ArtForum, High Times, and Interview.