

Steering Clear

Artist Hugh Steers paints the plague



New York artist Hugh Steers uses the visual language of painting and his experience of being HIV-positive to examine the emotional and social implications of being "plagued." His work reflects the widespread sense of alienation throughout contemporary culture. Steers' visual images document and explore a shifting terrain where traditional gender and social roles are disintegrating and what we are left with is both a great opportunity and a terrible burden—the blank slate. An exhibition of Steers' paintings and works on paper is currently showing at The Richard Anderson Gallery through October 3. Erich Conrad met with Steers, a funny and charming fellow, one afternoon over a pot of tea.

Erich Conrad: How many works are in your show?

Hugh Steers: Four large pieces on canvas and about ten small works on paper. So it's a good overview of my imagery.

EC: The characters in your work always seem to be isolated. Why?

HS: It comes from my own sense that it's impossible to escape isolation; there's only so far you can go with another person. A lot of the scenes I depict in my work are moments when people are most isolated or frightened, desperately looking for some kind of connection.

EC: Are you sad?

HS: I have a real melancholy streak in me. A lot of my work dwells on mortality and I guess in a funny way I'm well suited for this condition I have. I was fascinated by death and the possibility of it long before I found out that I was HIV-positive.

EC: Does death still fascinate you?

HS: Extremely; I try to confront it dead on. What I do in my work is examine what is really disturbing about a certain situation and find a way to express it in imagery. The painting "Throat" came out of that feeling you get when you have AIDS, where you start to distrust your own body. The painting depicts a figure looking down his throat checking for thrush. That whole sense of distrust, the expectation that your body will betray you, is what I'm dealing with now. Other paintings deal with the fact that in these great, tragic moments you're all alone and there's only so much anyone can do for you.

EC: What frightens you most?

HS: It's very odd, because when I get really upset I really don't know what it is exactly that I'm afraid of. I don't think dying is so frightening. I think it's probably very peaceful.

EC: Would you classify your work as American?

HS: I think I'm in the tradition of a

certain kind of American artist—artists whose work embodies a certain gorgeous bleakness. Edward Hopper, Jackson Pollack, Franz Klein—they all had this austere beauty to them. They found beauty in the most brutal forms. I think that's what characterizes America, the atmosphere, its culture, its cities and the landscape. They all have that soft glow of brutality.

EC: Where do you come from?

HS: I was born in Washington, DC and I went to boarding school in Connecticut—Hodgkiss, a very isolated and strict school—before going on to Yale.

EC: Were the boys strict at Hodgkiss?

HS: Very! (laughter)

EC: How did you come out?

HS: By default. I guess I was always out without ever knowing it. My mother took my little brother and I to see Bette Midler's *Clams on the Half Shell Revue* at the Minskoff Theater when I was 12. We weren't exactly sheltered.

EC: You definitely know you're gay after a Bette Midler concert.

HS: No doubt. (laughter)

EC: Rumor has it that your uncle is Gore Vidal and your aunt is Jackie Onassis.

HS: It's true. Gore is my mother's half-brother and Jackie is my mother's step-sister.

EC: How close are you to Gore?



HS: Quite close, I just talked to him the other day. He's been tremendously supportive and generous.

EC: What about Jackie? What is she like?

HS: What is she like? Uh... My mother and her are close, I don't see her that often. She's very gracious and lovely, she actually went to see the Queer Show that I was in at Wessel O'Connor, which I thought was tremendously game of her. She's an amazing woman who's turned herself into quite an amazing icon of our times.

EC: What's ahead for Hugh Steers?

HS: I have a show coming up at the Grey Art Gallery that I'm very excited about. Right now I just want to work. I have a lot of work to do and I don't know how much time I have.

EC: Do you like porno, Hugh?

HS: Uh, huh! My work is full of it, a lot of voyeuristic, fly-on-the-wall kind of stuff.

EC: Who's your favorite porn star?

HS: It's funny, but I actually prefer straight porn because the men are much more believable. I find gay porn really kind of oppressive.

EC: It's so predictable.

HS: And everyone's so perfect.

EC: What about the pornographic sentimentality in your work?

HS: The danger of sentimentality in the subject matter I deal with is very great. For me, the challenge is getting as close as possible to the pornographic or the sentimental without falling over. It's part of the tension I have to maintain in my work.

EC: Next question...

HS: If you were a tree...

EC: You're not comparing me to Barbara Walters are you?

HS: Not at all. *(laughter)*

EC: I do wish I had her money, and her hair, but honey...

HS: And her wardrobe, of course.

EC: I don't know about that.

HS: She's got some nice suits, and very respectable breasts!

EC: OK, color me Barbara. Do you classify yourself as a gay artist?

HS: No, I don't know what gay art is. What I try and get into my painting is the humanity of a moment, and that moment could be between two men or a man and a woman or two women. Everybody should be able to identify with it. It's all about humanity.

EC: Hugh, if you were a tree what tree would you be?

HS: I would be an elm tree, sort of perishable and doomed. They're sort of poetic, all big and strong but they're all dying from a horrible disease. **Q**