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“Hugh’s Work Was Mostly Overlooked By The Art Cognoscenti Of The Time.” By -Visual AIDS Staff



Bath Curtain (1992) Oil on canvas 71.94h x 60.13w in (182.73h x 152.73w cm)

Carl George is a man of many talents. His film *DHPG Mon Amour* remains an underground classic. His ability to make an event happen in the most glorious of ways is well known, and his collaborations with downtown luminaries such as Gordon Kurrti are legendary. Whether on celluloid, or in person Carl George knows how to make a moment matter, resonate.

At Visual AIDS we have had a chance to get to know Carl George due to his relationship with the downtown art scene and beyond.

Beginning on January 12th, Alexander Gray Associates presents [Hugh Steers](#), an exhibition of the late figurative painter Hugh Steers, who is also part of the Visual AIDS Online Registry. Carl George was close to Hugh Steers and was kind enough to answer a few of our questions.

VISUAL AIDS: CARL, HOW DID YOU KNOW HUGH STEERS? HOW DID YOU MEET?

Hugh and I met in 1984 while both working for a florist / event planner named Michael Fenner, the preeminent party planner in New York in the '80's. Hugh and I both

worked free-lance for him doing party set-ups at places like MOMA, the Guggenheim and for rich clients like Anne and Gordon Getty, Bill and Camille Cosby and Jane Wrightsman. We became lovers for a short while, then friends for life.

VISUAL AIDS: I WONDER IF YOU COULD PUT STEERS' WORK IN CONTEXT OF THE TIME? HOW WAS IT RECEIVED?

Hugh's work was mostly overlooked by the art cognoscenti of the time. He was a classically trained figurative painter and art gallerists, critics and curators had their eyes firmly fixed on post-modernism, minimalist and conceptual art. Nothing else was worth looking at, according to them. It was very frustrating for Hugh because he believed that depicting small intimate moments between individuals could convey enormous meaning and could carry the weight of time. His use of deep, rich colors and luxurious fabrics in decidedly working class interiors - like the East Village tenement where he lived and worked, presented an engaging visual juxtaposition that acted as a metaphor for the emotions of the characters in the paintings. All of his painting techniques harkened back to other times - Victorian, Baroque, Renaissance - where allegory was essential in art - as a tool with which to convey a message. It just didn't fit into mid-80's New York art scene. Still, some gallerists and critics appreciated what he was doing. The interest in his art certainly increased when he began to address his failing health and the AIDS crisis in his work.

VISUAL AIDS: WITH A LOT OF CULTURE BEING PRODUCED AND RE-EXAMINED AROUND HIV/AIDS ACTIVISM AND THE LATE 80S I HAVE BEEN THINKING OF THIS QUOTE FROM FRANK MOORE: "I DO THINK ART CAN EFFECT CHANGE IN A SOCIETY, THOUGH IT TAKES A LONG TIME TO OPERATE, ALMOST TO THE POINT THAT THE BETTER THE PAINTING THE LONGER IT TAKES TO ACHIEVE ITS FULL IMPACT." I WONDER BASED ON YOUR OWN PRACTICE AND ALL THAT YOU HAVE SEE AND DO, WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE QUOTE.

It's an interesting quote but highly subjective. "...the better the painting..." is a troubling phrase. Great art, painting included, has oftentimes been very immediate and impactful. Picasso's Guernica is a good example - a masterpiece created almost immediately after the bombing of the village of Guernica in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. Other examples include works by Malevich, Rafael Soyer, Ana Mendieta, Leon Golub, Nancy Speero, Karen Finley, Hans Haacke, Ai Wei Wei etc - and I would include Hugh in this list. There is a political immediacy to some art that is not only pertinent to issues of the time but essential and oftentimes radical in it's effect.

VISUAL AIDS: AS SOMEONE WHO HAS REALLY MADE AN ART OF COLLABORATION, AND WORKING WITH OTHERS, I WOULD WHAT ADVICE YOU HAVE TO GIVE ABOUT MAKING IT WORK?

Being a Leo, I have innate leadership qualities that naturally apply to coordinating, organizing, curating and looking at the bigger picture. I can see where peoples' strengths lie and I nurture those. The key is to listen more and say less and sometimes that's hard because, again, being a Leo, I have an enormous ego!

VISUAL AIDS: WHAT PROJECTS ARE YOU WORKING ON RIGHT NOW THAT YOU ARE EXCITED ABOUT?

Some great art projects that I'm very excited about. I've been working on a new film for 2 years now, collecting images, data, text and ideas and am now at the point where I can start to assemble and edit. Very exciting. The working title is "Screwed".

I continue to work with Allied Productions, our not-for-profit arts organization that Jack Waters, Peter Cramer, Susan Brown and myself started 30 years ago. We've experienced impressive growth over the last 5 years and are sponsoring more artists, exhibitions and film / video screenings through our film adjunct, Naked Eye Cinema, than ever before. It's a great thing.

Also, for nearly three years now I've been cataloging the artwork of Gordon Kurtti, a seminal artist of the early East Village art scene, who was born on May 4th 1960 and died of AIDS related illnesses on April 18th, 1987 - two weeks shy of his 27th birthday. Gordon studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York where he formed a life-long

friendship and artistic collaboration with classmate Kembra Pfahler. He worked with Liz Dunn in the mid '80's drawing, under the nom de plume of *Sketch Louis*, the advertising images for Café La Mama's "One Night Stands" and capturing performers like Kimberly Flynn, Edgar Oliver, Hapi Phace, Lypsinka and Watchface. His depictions of celebrities and New York City street scenes, mothers and children waiting in Grand Central Station, homeless men, street urchins and bug eyed socialites are unparalleled.

And now, I'm thrilled to say there will an exhibition of his work at Participant Inc., June 2 - July 14, 2013. I'm preparing the artwork, working with Baobab Art Services on the restoration and framing and Dancing Foxes Press for the exhibition catalog.

As part of the exhibition I'm also curating a series of performances called "**One Night Stands**" loosely based on the series at La Mama. The series will take place in Participant because I like the idea of bringing performance back into a gallery, and so that more people will see Gordon's work. The participating artist so far include:

Kembra Pfahler, Edgar Oliver, Penny Arcade, John Kelly, Marga Gomez, Jack Waters, Karen Finley, Peter Cramer, John "Lypsinka" Epperson, Kimberly Flynn, Justin Sayer, Carmelita Tropicana, Samoa, Joe Westmoreland, Q. Sakamaki, Eileen Myles, Hapi Phace, Tabboo! **Such a drippingly glamorous list of artists!** I'm verklempt just looking at it!
