

Hugh Steers

By Carl George

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When I look at the paintings featured here, images of beautiful young men with toned and comely legs perched confidently on mile-high stilettos, a sexy body twisting and turning in black lingerie and garters, and shoulders being presented to last night's lover as he hands over a white mink trapeze coat, it makes perfect sense that I recall Hugh telling me that as a young boy and into his early teens, he trained as a figure skater, with his eyes squarely fixed on Olympic gold. And had he not picked up brushes and canvas, pencils, and paper, and been accepted into Yale's MFA program, I have no doubt that he would have succeeded and stood proudly on that highest podium, hand over heart. Everything Hugh did, he did with purpose and intent, and a kind of willful determination the likes of which I had never seen.

Hugh and I met in the mid-80s while working for Michael Fenner who at the time, was New York's premiere florist and party planner. We bonded instantly, briefly as lovers, then as best friends. We worked free-lance which provided each of us with rent money and the means with which to make our art – Hugh's, painting and drawing and mine, film, and collage. I asked Hugh to be in a super-8 film I was working on, "The Boy is Gone," based on a poem by Edgar Oliver. Hugh was to have two parts – as a young boy abandoned by his mother outside a railroad station and as a mourner at a funeral. Looking back, both roles now seem prescient. As young gay men in New York in the 1980s, we were soon to learn what it meant to be abandoned and, disproportionately to

our age, have death all around us. But then we were young, excited about life and full of possibility even though we could already see the ominous signs of a coming storm.

One day Hugh told me that he had found a wonderful apartment on Avenue A – a railroad flat directly above a pizza parlor. Windows wide open to the noise of the street and the smells of hot pizza wafting throughout the apartment - he did not mind; he was in heaven. Hugh was dedicated and structured with his work schedule – every day from 10am until 5pm. Sometimes he worked with live models but mostly not. He was making small oil on paper paintings depicting intimate moments between men in simple domestic settings - very much like the East Village tenement apartment he was living in. He loved the work of Bonnard, Vuillard, Ingres, Mantegna, Caravaggio, Raphael, Tintoretto, and the photography of Avedon who was a family friend - and these influences are evident in the deep, rich colors he used, the chiaroscuro, the elegant draping of fabric, composition, deep perspective, and the slant of light, as if to summon back time with a depression-era bathtub or an overturned wooden chair. When he did work on large canvases, usually propped up on a huge wooden easel in the kitchen, the proportion and scale of the finished work – a result of the cramped quarters he lived and worked in – oftentimes gave the paintings a wonderfully warped perspective. He worked diligently on getting perspective just so – laboring over a pair of legs or outstretched arm until he would call and excitedly exclaim that he had finally gotten it right. I was the first person to buy Hugh's work. I especially loved the small oil on paper works and bought several of them over time for \$75 each – a substantial amount for both of us. I would pay him and then, with an insouciance that defined the time, we would blow the money

at the Pyramid Club, or at The Bar – a neighborhood gay hangout, drinking martinis – him vodka and me gin. These artworks thus became known as the “martini suite”.

Michael Fenner was one of the first to go. He was admitted to the hospital Thanksgiving weekend and stayed there until Easter when he died. Soon after that another dear friend, Gordon Kurtti died. He was diagnosed HIV+ in December and died four months later in April 1987. Hugh made an exquisitely tender painting of Kembra Pfahler and me at my kitchen table after Gordon’s memorial at the East River Park and it remains to this day my favorite painting of Hugh’s. Then Hugh told me that he was infected. He was resolute and determined to forge ahead and fight, continue painting, and take whatever treatments were available to combat the disease. There were not many.

He addressed the illness through his art depicting images of bravery and tenderness, humor and rage while boldly critiquing the government’s inaction, endemic homophobia, hateful religious fundamentalism, and opportunistic corporate greed during a spiraling epidemic. A lot to manage for a 30-year-old guy, but Hugh persisted and continued to paint every day creating an acrobatic superhero character he named “Hospital Man” – dressed in a backless hospital gown, naked butt exposed, oftentimes hooked up to a catheter, and always wearing killer high heels while precariously balanced on the edge of a bathtub or toilet seat. Through Hospital Man, Hugh was able to express his anger, his camp humor, the absurdity and incredulity of the time, and the horrors that we were all experiencing. It was Hugh’s form of activism and catharsis and it was during this time that Hugh’s health really faltered and began its descent toward death. The months of constant illness, medical procedures, and dozens of harsh medications taken every day

to combat a battery of opportunistic infections took their toll on his mind, body, and spirit. Ultimately, like so many others, it was a fight he would lose.

Through his artwork, Hugh humanized AIDS, the struggle to control our bodies and healthcare, the bonding of disparate communities fighting a common enemy, who came to realize we are not so different after all, and the sometimes strangely hopeful ramifications of the disease. Hugh raised the bar of culpability and pointed an accusing finger at those whose willful inaction or callous reaction condemned so many to die, while making the injustice and the stolen potential of this holocaust heart-wrenchingly clear.

Hugh Steers died March 1, 1995, with his brother Burr, his friend Hyun Mi Oh and me surrounding his bedside, holding his hands, and speaking softly to him. After having fought so hard and for so long, he slipped away with one long, last breath releasing his gentle soul into the world. Joseph Campbell said, "The seat of the soul is there, where the inner and outer worlds meet." Hugh, as a vibrant and hopeful young man and as a burgeoning, brilliant artist exemplified this idea better than anyone I have known.

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