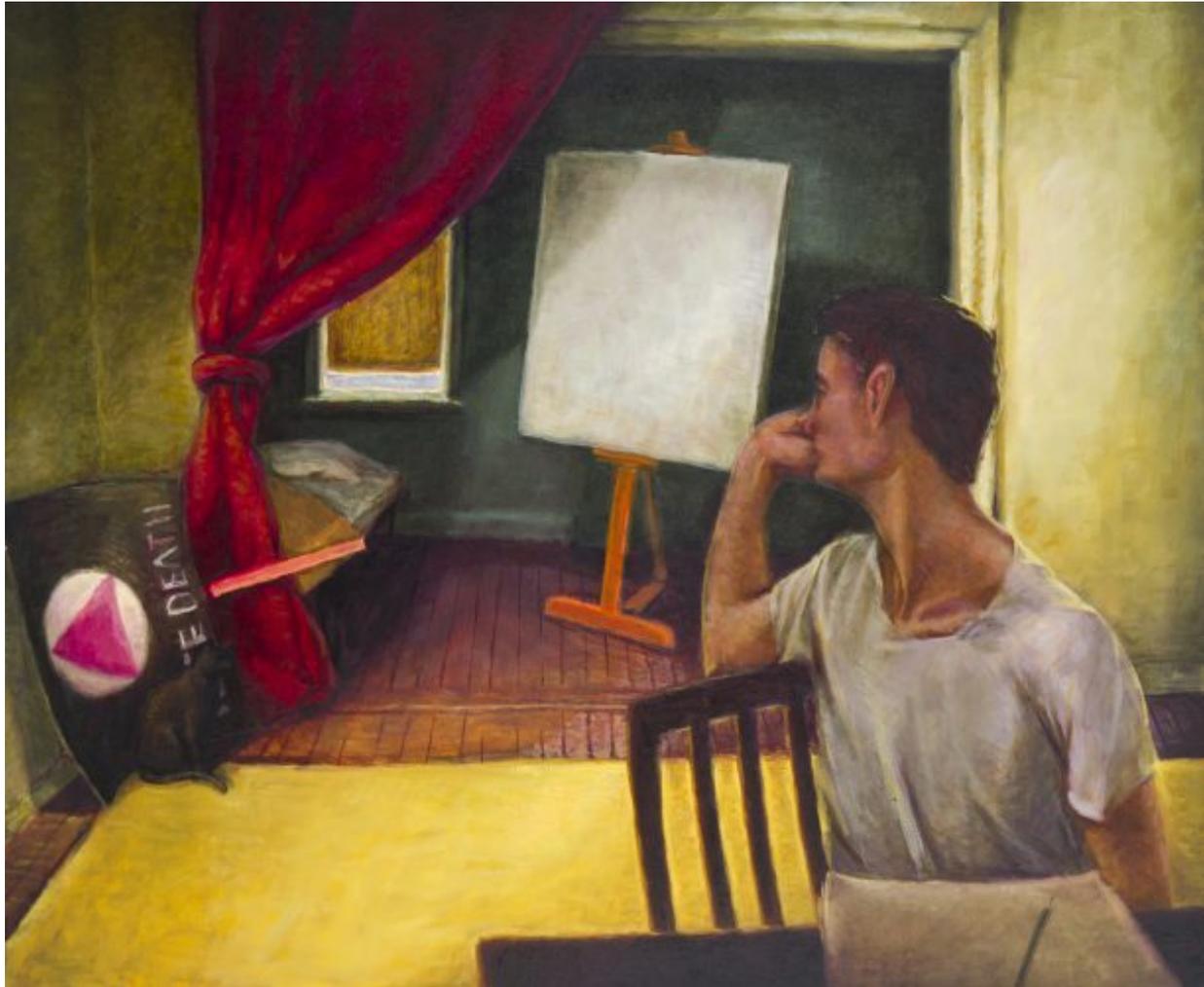


## And We Watched The World As It Fell Past: Domestic Intimacy As Activism Hugh Steers's "The Nullities of Life"

[filthydreams.org/2018/07/01/and-we-watched-the-world-as-it-fell-past-domestic-intimacy-as-activism-hugh-steerss-the-nullities-of-life/](https://filthydreams.org/2018/07/01/and-we-watched-the-world-as-it-fell-past-domestic-intimacy-as-activism-hugh-steerss-the-nullities-of-life/)

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July 1, 2018



Hugh Steers, Poster, 1990, Oil on canvas, 42.25h x 51w in (107.31h x 129.54w cm), Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Estate of Hugh Steers

It's been a long year this week, hasn't it? Between the Supreme Court upholding the travel ban, Justice Kennedy retiring (fingers crossed for Supreme Court Justice Jeanine Pirro), the shootings at the *Capital Gazette* and the daily insanity of Trump's Wrestlemania-esque tweets, I'm tired. And this fatigue doesn't just come from our national politics.

This week, *The New York Times* compounded this shit storm by publishing an ill-informed and potentially dangerous opinion piece by "historian" Patrick William Kelly, who is currently writing a book on the global history of AIDS (oh, good). Entitled "The End of Safe Gay Sex?" Kelly revitalizes the fear-mongering and misinformation that we all missed from the height of the paranoia about HIV transmission by connecting the use of PrEP with the decrease of condom

use and potential rise of STI's. For example, he describes gay sexual culture as "carnivorous" and equates the appearance of HIV/AIDS to the sexual culture of the 1970s "during which," he notes, "diseases were traded rampantly, fueled by a libertine culture that saw penicillin as the panacea for all ills." Boiling down queer men into animalistic ids, doesn't it make you a bit nostalgic for Jerry Falwell and the like?

To compound things, he also writes, "AIDS is no longer a crisis, at least in the United States, and that is a phenomenal public health success story. But it also means that an entire generation of gay men has no memory or interest in the devastation it wrought." I can't even begin to parse out everything wrong here, but I think the end of the AIDS crisis would be a shock to Black and Brown communities.



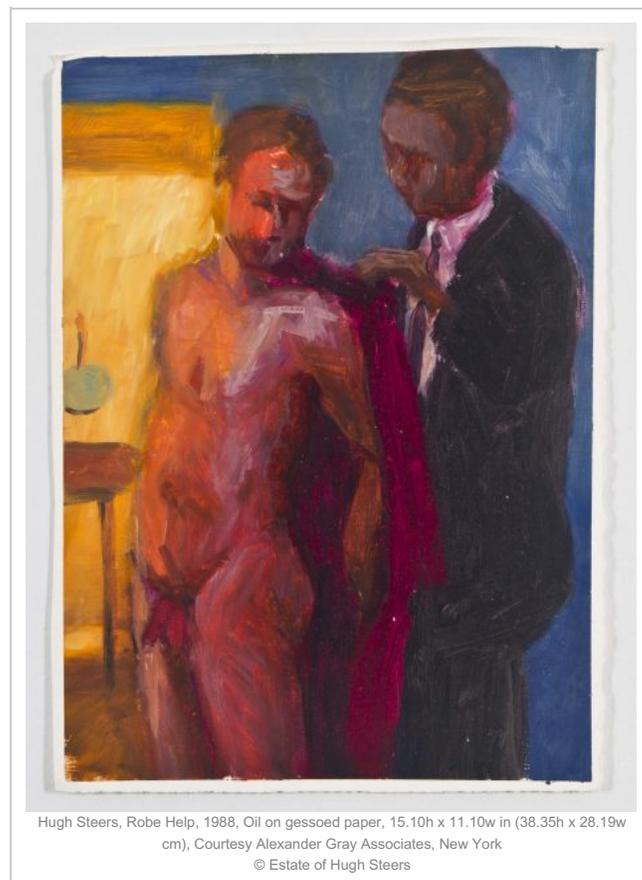
Hugh Steers, Mr. Coffee, 1993, Oil on canvas, 48h x 34w in (121.92h x 86.36w cm),  
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Estate of Hugh Steers

Reading this editorial, I found myself sighing and staring off into the middle distance. Are we doomed to repeat these same debates over and over again? And what to do in response? Yell

over Twitter? Make more activist artwork that gets coopted by commercial galleries seeking to brand themselves as the “resistance”?

A familiar and relatable weariness can be seen in a painting by [Hugh Steers](#), which is currently on view in his solo exhibition [The Nullities of Life](#) at [Alexander Gray Associates](#). In *Poster*, a man in a white T-shirt, an angelically normcore wardrobe choice that pervades many of Steers’s works, sits at a desk, glancing behind him at a protest sign emblazoned with Silence = Death and the iconic pink triangle (Or he might just be glaring at his cat who sits in front of the sign). The sign is the only object in the room with a bold, articulated message, as the man is surrounded by representations of emptiness: a blank piece of paper, a bare bed and an empty canvas.

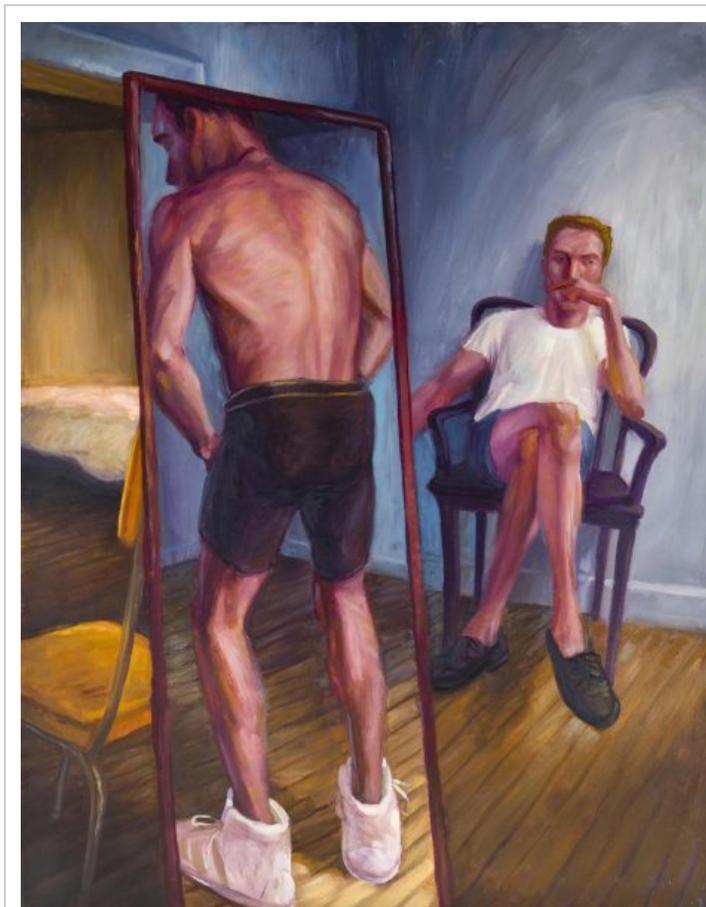
With this juxtaposition, Steers brings activism from the crowded streets into an secluded interior setting. With his head turned away from the viewer, it’s nearly impossible to categorize what the sitter is thinking and yet, the lone figure, isolated and resting his head on his hand, seems to be the definitive representation of burnout, which Ann Cvetkovich describes in [An Archive of Feelings](#) as “so often the personal and occupational hazard of those doing political and social service work around AIDS” (212). These quiet moments, experienced alone, are often less represented from the collective anger in the street yet they are no less a part of activism. Here, Steers gives us a look at the other side of protest—the banal, the unseen and the exhausted. Even though Steers died from complications from AIDS in 1995, who can’t relate in 2018?



Hugh Steers, *Robe Help*, 1988, Oil on gessoed paper, 15.10h x 11.10w in (38.35h x 28.19w cm), Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York  
© Estate of Hugh Steers

Steers's paintings and drawings in *The Nullities of Life*, while perhaps not always so obviously addressing AIDS activism as a Silence = Death poster, depict tender moments of intimacy, caretaking and love between men during the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The exhibition's title is derived from a quote Steers found and loved from a *New York Times* book review of a Van Gogh biography. According to the show's press release, Steers saw the phrase as "a complete articulation of what I at least think I'm trying to do." And he's right. Embracing the mundane and perhaps, even uninteresting, Steers takes these seemingly insignificant moments, such as looking in a mirror, making coffee in the morning with a lover, helping a loved one put on a robe and trying on sneakers, and imbues them with meaning. Of course, these inconsequential nullities take on increased significance when an entire generation is dying during a period of institutional and governmental neglect.

Discussing the memoirs of lesbian caretakers during the HIV/AIDS pandemic in *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich reflects, "Memoir has the potential to explore emotional terrain that is harder to get at through interviews; the sanctuary of writing, its privacy and deliberateness, potentially offers an arena for emotional honesty that is different from the live performance of an interview" (210). In many ways, painting, particularly Steers's painting, is similar. The practice of painting is typically solitary work, leaving open the possibility for a more intimate view of domestic life during a crisis.



Hugh Steers, *High Tops*, 1994, Oil on canvas, 51.13h x 44w in (129.86h x 111.76w cm),  
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Estate of Hugh Steers

Of course, at the time these works were made, traditional figurative painting wasn't exactly popular. As Steers told Erich Conrad in a 1992 issue of *QW Magazine*, "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 Pollock, 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 landscape. They all have that soft glow of brutality." While he references these American artists, as well as El Greco in his diptych *Phones: Tribute to El Greco* on view at Alexander Gray, I'd also put his works in conversation with the sensuality, homoerotic gaze and expressionist style in Paul Cadmus's nudes and Larry Rivers's portrait *O'Hara Nude with Boots*.

No matter who you compare Steers to, however, it's undeniable that his work looks like a product of another era. Take, for instance, his small oil on paper *Black Leather Jacket & White T-shirt*, which portrays a shirtless man sitting on a small twin bed and another man in the entitled wardrobe choice slumped in a chair. Even though it was painted in 1989, a time when the leather jacket and T-shirt combo was synonymous with a certain ACT UP chic, the scene looks as if it could have taken place in a 1950s greaser film starring James Dean. In other works, details, like the big white sneakers in *High Tops*, place the pieces firmly within the 1980s and 1990s, which can be jarring in contrast with Steers's retro style.



Hugh Steers, *Black Leather Jacket & White T-Shirt*, 1989, Oil on gessoed paper, 11.20h x 14.90w in (28.45h x 37.85w cm),  
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Estate of Hugh Steers

Ultimately, Steers's work showcases how intimacy, in particular the intimacy performed in domestic spaces, can be transformed into an activist gesture. When queer life is threatened, not only does sex become radical, but so does a quiet embrace while making your morning coffee as in Steers's *Mr. Coffee*. Similarly, Cvetkovich writes in *An Archive of Feelings*, "Intimacy and affective relationships are based on physical transactions. Cumulatively, these

AIDS caretaking memoirs add to queer representations of sexuality by finding eroticism and affect in physical acts that are just as intimate as those between families, lovers or friends” (223).



Hugh Steers, *Pockets*, 1993, Oil on canvas, 60h x 54w in (152.40h x 137.16w cm)  
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Estate of Hugh Steers

But the works in *The Nullities of Life* don't just showcase these tender moments. They also reveal periods of suffering and solitude. In *Pockets*, a man lies on his bed with his hands shoved in his pant pockets. With an ambiguous expression, it looks as if he might be in pain, whether physical or emotional, as his cat looks on concerned (or, let's be honest, curious when it'll be fed). In another painting, *Yellow Rug*, a lone nude figure looks at himself in the mirror, with bottles of pills and a tube of ointment set on the table. Behind him, a pair of high-heeled shoes topple together on the floor in a subtle nod to drag.

Even though there might be a bleakness to these paintings, Steers's work is never nihilistic. Instead, he finds the beauty in these sparse Lower Manhattan apartments with bathtubs in the

center of their tenement kitchens. Of course, the representation of domesticity for queer men during the 1980s and 1990s was and, if the retrograde opinion piece in the *New York Times* this week is any indication, still is radical.



Hugh Steers, *Yellow Rug*, 1992, Oil On Canvas, 50.19h x 45.38w in (127.48h x 115.25w cm), Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Estate of Hugh Steers

And this is refreshing because ever since Trump was elected, artists have been trying to articulate what exactly it means to be an artist at a time of necessary political engagement. Is the only way to make activist art creating a flag that says “Resist” like [Marilyn Minter](#)? Is it starting your own Super PAC like Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman’s [For Freedoms](#)? Or can it be just making paintings showing care in a time when anyone who is perceived as Other is at risk? While, of course, this isn’t an either/or question, Steers’s *The Nullities of Life* proves that intimacy in interior spaces and renderings of affects not normally associated with activism—the ones Sianne Ngai would call “[ugly feelings](#)”—can have strong political resonances too.

As Hugh Steers said to *Art in America*, quoted in a text by Scott Hunt for a Visual AIDS's web gallery, "That painting a man holding another man is conjuring that tenderness, that hope that someone will still care about you and will be there. It's like wishful thinking, a kind of touchstone for those who are traumatized by the same situations. They can see it and say: someone else has been there."