



Carl George reflects on the life and art of best friend Hugh Steers

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“Birthday Card for Hugh” Text excerpted from “My Antonia” by Willa Cather

Carl George is a collagist, filmmaker and curator. Carl and [Hugh Steers](#) were best friends, art collaborators, sisters on the dance floor and brothers in arms in the war on AIDS. Here, Carl reflects on Hugh’s life and art, in anticipation of his reading in front of Hugh’s last residential address at [208 West 23rd Street](#) for the Last Address Tribute Walk. We hope to see you on Saturday, August 29, for this year’s version of the annual Last Address Tribute Walk; further information [here](#).

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've known.

We bonded instantly, briefly as lovers, then as best friends. We met in the mid-'80s working freelance for Michael Fenner who, at the time, was New York's premiere florist and party planner. The job 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 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 early '80s, 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 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. I'd sometimes hang out there and watch him paint, although he generally preferred to be alone when working. Windows wide open to the noise of the street and the smells of hot pizza wafting throughout the apartment--he didn't mind, he was in heaven. Hugh was dedicated and structured with his work schedule: every day from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. I had never met another artist who worked this way; most were more haphazard or nocturnal. Sometimes he worked with live models but mostly not. During this time he was primarily making small oil-on-paper paintings depicting intimate moments between men in simple domestic settings. He loved the work of Bonnard, Vuillard, Ingres and Tintoretto, and these influences are evident in the deep, rich colors he used, the draping of fabric, the slant of the light as if it were to summon back time, 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--often 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'd call and excitedly exclaim that he'd 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'd pay him and then, with an insouciance that defined the time, we'd blow the money at the Pyramid Club hanging out with Hyun Mi, or at the Bar, a neighborhood gay hangout, drinking martinis, him vodka and me gin, until we were sufficiently plastered. The 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 positive 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, keep painting

and take whatever treatments were available to combat the disease. There weren't 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 in the midst of a spiraling epidemic. A lot to manage for a 30-year-old guy, especially as his own health rapidly deteriorated. But Hugh persisted and continued to paint every day in a basement studio in Tribeca, a place that he found when he moved into a one-bedroom apartment on 23rd Street. It was during this time that Hugh's health really faltered and began its descent toward death--the months of constant illness, dozens of harsh medications taken every day to combat a battery of opportunistic infections. Ultimately, like so many other people, it was a fight he would lose.

So much of my time now is spent remembering friends and lovers whose lives were ended, severed while just beginning this great ride. I've tried but cannot answer the question about what death means and why I've survived while others haven't. As a man of 57 years--many of which I've been living with AIDS--it's hard to comprehend the cruel chaos that defines who lives or dies. But, through his artwork and life, Hugh humanized AIDS and the awful and 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 void, the absence, the injustice, the stolen potential of this holocaust heart-wrenchingly clear.

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