’Hugh’s painting evolved into a singular style that grew in intensity and focus and took flight’

January 29, 2016 By Visual AIDS

Hyun Mi Oh is a writer, filmmaker and design entrepreneur. Her friendship with Hugh Steers took root in downtown New York in the late ’80s and deepened after she moved to Los Angeles, most meaningfully through letters that trace the painter’s personal and artistic growth during the final years of his illness. Here, Hyun Mi reflects on her friendship with Steers for Visual AIDS and shares images of the letters that Hugh wrote to her. The reflection was originally posted on the Yale AIDS Memorial Project website, where other moving tributes to Steers can be read.

Hyun Mi will be in conversation about Steers’s life and artwork with Nicola Goode, Steers’s friend and former roommate, as well as Visual AIDS Programs Manager Alex Fialho, at the Los Angeles Art Book Fair (LAABF) on Friday, February 12, at 1 p.m. at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA; more information here. Visual AIDS will launch the Hugh Steers monograph in Los Angeles at the LAABF from February 12-14.

I was always late. For our coffee and dinner dates, our long walks and talks in Central Park, for visits to his studio and the many club hops that shaped our nights. I can see him sitting on a stoop or standing on a street corner expectantly looking out for me--sometimes worried, never mad--and the delight springing to his face when he spotted me. No one since has ever been quite as happy to see me as Hugh was every time we met. This memory visits me often, the image of him waiting for me.

Long before his diagnosis, Hugh took time seriously and couldn’t bear to waste any of it. I remember after our graduation ceremony while most of us were milling about dazed and confused, Hugh was packed and dressed to board the train for New York where he was to start his job at the Dia Art Foundation the next morning. No boozy farewells for him, his eyes were on the prize: to become an artist of the first order. There was also the reality of supporting himself, having little access to the storied wealth he descended from. His family came with heavy baggage, though none of it bearing any of that old money. Hugh was on his own. He saw the steps ahead of him so clearly: to perfect the painting techniques necessary to build a singular and enduring body of work, then to go out and hustle it. For Hugh this meant a monkish discipline, and even more impressive, a refusal to abandon figurative painting at a time when few were buying or even considering representational art.

Our friendship blossomed after Yale, first in New York, then most memorably in the letters we exchanged once I moved to Los Angeles to become a filmmaker. We both knew he was HIV positive by then. Long distance calls were expensive, so we consciously dipped back into an epistolary mode, exchanging letters, music and clippings of writing and ideas that thrilled us. Mostly, we consoled each other through our hapless attempts at love. Hugh talked about what the disease was doing to him and his work. He was hesitant at first to make his illness a subject in his paintings, thinking it would make them merely topical or social commentary. Inevitably though, living with AIDS quickened the pulse of his work and acted like a crucible to distill what was most vital and precious to him.

In a letter after one of his art shows proved less than groundbreaking, he wrote: “I sort of feel like Bette Midler’s description of the Rose, ’She gave and gave ’til no one gave a shit.’ In the creative arts, one spends all this time in isolation working and nobody knows or cares what you’re doing.” Still, Hugh pressed on and grew ever more determined in his approach to painting.

I’ve finally come to accept my lack of facility or capacity to convincingly shift styles as a virtue... I think I value single-mindedness, a “burn all bridges” approach. To me it signifies the Artist has put everything on the line and that lends power to the work.

Hugh was right about his art. His painting evolved into a singular style that grew in intensity and focus, and near his death, took flight. In his last series of paintings, “Hospital Man,” a heroic, angelic figure, gives exquisite form to Hugh’s reckoning with death.

My Hospital Man series is coming along nicely. In fact, it’s literally taking off. I have this idea for a painting where Hospital Man is ascending off the canvas upper-right, his body visible only from the chest down, nude under his billowing hospital gown and sporting some lite [sic], airy white sling backs (not the usual mega-

platforms). Lower left is a supine Adonis “expired” after sex or illness. I’m really going off, but I think my technique is there to make it work. Remember how we talked about one’s art creating one’s consciousness rather than exposing some pre-existing truth?

Pouring everything he had into his work--his humor, rage, intelligence, and most of all, his tender heart--he took his own death in hand and pulled off a sublime exit. Hugh soared.

I am rarely late now. After Hugh died, running late would often trigger the image of him waiting for me, and oh, the remorse! It took me to middle age to finally catch up to Hugh’s burning sense of time and purpose and return to a long deferred dream to write. If I’m lucky now, I have 20 years to become a writer I would want to read. It feels late in the game, but then I remember what Hugh was able to do in a handful of years. I can hear him saying, “Girl, what are you waiting for? Get to work.”

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/hughs-painting-evolv