

# Julie Heffernan on Hugh Steers

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Hugh Steers loved painting, and that saved his life even as he was losing it. Yes, he had dear friends who cared deeply for him, comforted him and helped him along in his final years, but the number and character of painted figures that he conjured on a daily basis in the studio constitutes a virtual citadel of paramours. In a real way those characters were Hugh's constant companions, avatars of love and friendship that every one of us needs in order to survive day-to-day. Hugh painted every day and there is not one Steers painting I can think of that doesn't include a figure of some sort. Few are female—no surprise there—and I recognized one or two still life figures from the Advanced Painting class I taught, where we met. But all the rest are men, and what a fabulous assortment of guys they are! Touching and washing each other, administering to each others' needs, or simply spending time together in the same small room, these men provided Hugh a rich, intimate life—just as real, I would assert, as any actual lover. There is a quiescence to their interacting that bespeaks the kind of closeness and self-containment we all long for in friendship and love. It is my sense that Hugh made a choice: he was dying, and I'm guessing he didn't want to bother with all the foibles of flesh-and-blood relationships that had already proved over and over again to be unreliable, so he found them in his work. Hugh was no fool—he knew where the real thing could be had.

Painting is immersive. The act of making the kinds of paintings Hugh did so beautifully, with their ordered, intricate compositions and glowing color, can smooth out a frazzled mind within minutes, streamline thoughts, make priorities plain. The focused attention and loving touch that goes into paintings wrought from passion instead of irony or strategy provide an immensely satisfying experience for the maker. And accomplishment is its own serotonin delivery system. In the amount of time he had, Hugh accomplished more than anyone I know could have. He would literally run to the studio every day, bypassing invitations to lunch and shop in order to return to his love nest.

I have no doubt that Hugh would have found a steady lover over time had he made it into his mid-thirties when relationships improve as people become kinder and more self-aware. But Hugh went one better—he created his great loves right there in his studio, with all the fine, viscous materiality of oil paint, that he caressed and romanced into exquisite existence: to keep him company, look back at him and give him the virtual fulfillment he wished for, and found.

Julie Heffernan is a Professor of Fine Arts at Montclair State University and represented by PPOW in New York City, Catharine Clark in San Francisco and Mark Moore in Los Angeles, CA. Heffernan received her MFA from Yale School of Art where she was [Hugh Steers'](#) Advanced Painting teacher,

during which time they developed a deep and abiding friendship that continued on through Hugh's illness and eventual death. Heffernan reflects on Steers' painting practice and the paramours he conjured in the process.

Heffernan will be in conversation about Steers' life and artwork with Dale Peck and James Small at Alexander Gray Associates on Wednesday March 9 at 6:30PM for the Visual AIDS event "Catheter Kiss: The Paintings of Hugh Steers"; more information [here](#).

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