Remembering Hugh Steers

A reflection of the artist on ACT UP's 30th anniversary.

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By Jennifer Morton (Managing Editor)

Yesterday, I joined a few POZ staffers at ACT UP's 30th Anniversary Rally and March held in New York City. The event began at the New York City AIDS Memorial in Greenwich Village where veteran ACT UP members convened with fellow HIV activists and supporters to celebrate the anniversary of the formation of ACT UP and to emphasize the fact that AIDS is not over. During the march to Union Square, the rallying cry "ACT UP! Fight Back! End AIDS!" resonated through the streets.

At the opening rally, a bag was passed around containing names of former comrades who had died of AIDS-related causes. People were encouraged to draw a name from the bag and remember and honor that individual throughout the day and perhaps even learn more about their life.

I got Hugh Steers.

I never knew Hugh, but I already knew a little bit about his life. In 2015, Visual AIDS published a book of Hugh's paintings. (Full disclosure: I'm on the board of Visual AIDS.) I knew Hugh was a figurative painter who had studied at Yale. I knew he was related to Jackie Kennedy and Gore Vidal. I knew that in his later years his paintings focused on AIDS. And I knew that today his artwork resides in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center and the Denver Art Museum.

I also knew that in 1994, he was someone whose life was tragically cut short by AIDS—at age 32.

In 1994, we didn't have effective treatment for HIV like we do today. Today, we also have the tools and the science and the know-how to end AIDS in this generation. Yet people in the United States (and around the world) are still dying of AIDS-related causes and are still contracting HIV at alarming rates.

Yesterday's ACT UP march was an anniversary celebration, but it was also a call to arms. The group posted this on its Facebook page:

"We will commit ourselves to resisting the current political environment based on fear-mongering, bigotry, and the disenfranchisement of vulnerable people, including people living with HIV and

hepatitis C. We are still united in anger against policies that undermine people's right to health care, and we embrace the new tidal wave of resistance and activism to recommit to an end to AIDS in this generation!"

Before I left the gathering at Union Square, I added Hugh's name to the ACT UP 30 quilt panel to remember those lost to HIV/AIDS.

ACT UP 30 Quilt PanelJennifer Morton

When I got home, I pulled Hugh Steers: The Complete Paintings, 1983–1994 from my bookshelf and reflected on his life and work.



Morning Terrace, 1992Courtesy of the Estate of Hugh Steers

In honor of Hugh Steers and all those who have died of AIDS-related causes, we must continue to ACT UP and fight back—and we must end AIDS.

Click here to read more about Hugh and to see more of his art.

Click here to read more about ACT UP's 30th anniversary.

Check out POZ on Instagram to see more photos from the ACT UP March/Rally.

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