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ART

The Spirit Is Willing

HUGH STEERS has AIDS, and every one of the paintings and oil sketches in his show at Anderson (476 Broome Street; through December 3) touches on that theme. But the show isn't grim. There's a lot of caustic humor—which somehow gives the paintings an even deeper pathos. And while the artist's figurative approach is traditional, the sensibility behind it, with its mixture of menace and manic energy, is harshly contemporary.

Steers constantly courts failure with his reachy conceits—he draws his ideas from the frayed extremes of metaphor—and the risks give his work its uncomfortable tension. The best of his paintings are like hallucinations. In one picture, a fragile man dressed in white high-heeled mules and a hospital gown has become mysteriously airborne, like a baroque saint. In another, the same man, in the same heels, precariously navigates a bathtub's edge, extending a hand to a figure seated inside in a gesture of strange solicitude. Superhuman feats, envisioned by a painter who has reason to know that the flesh is all too frail.