

Hugh Steers

*Richard Anderson Fine Arts
63 Thompson Street
SoHo
Through Oct. 3*

In his second New York show, Hugh Steers infuses images of gay life with a combination of domestic tenderness and militancy that the subject has, up to now, rarely invited in figurative painting.

Mr. Steers's style suggests the forthright illustrational realism of American Scene painting. The figures, mostly of young men — often partly nude, sometimes dressed in women's clothes — are solidly modeled and placed in sparsely furnished

but theatrically lighted interiors. One is briefly reminded of Eric Fischl's suburban psychodramas, though the two painters could hardly be more different. In place of Mr. Fischl's calculated voyeurism, Mr. Steers offers an engaged view of a world in which AIDS has colored even everyday interactions with an awareness of mortality.

In a small oil sketch titled "Paper Cut" one man gently kisses a wound on the finger of another; in "Family," a woman bathes a man, presumably her grown son, in a tub. In one of the show's impressive large paintings, two nude men stand at the same tub embracing, seen through a clear plastic shower curtain; in another painting a man isolated in the center of a room fearfully raises a mirror above his head to examine his throat for signs of infection.

From painting to painting, the emotional temperature varies, creating a complex expressive texture. In one of the show's most poignant images, a man tries to dress another in a room flooded with golden autumnal light recalling Bonnard. And in one of the most striking, a man stands for a Baroque-style full-length portrait, replete with a huge swag of purple cloth. He wears a mini-skirt, black pumps and a T-shirt bearing the American flag. One hand is on his hip, the other holds a baseball bat, its tip just an inch from the ground as if it were tensed to swing. His face is half hidden in shadow, but his fixed side-long stare embodies the sometimes suppressed anger that underpins Mr. Steers's compelling work.

HOLLAND COTTER