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Arthur Lerner's realist paintings have a peculiar ambiance, a distinct aura. Though the objects he paints are cast in a searing light, the paintings themselves seem to emit a protective atmospheric veil which distances them from the viewer and makes their apparent realism partially ungraspable. This impregnable quality sets up a dichotomy with realism's supposed objectivity which is further emphasized by Lerner's intense focus upon the abstract or formal elements in his paintings. That is, the placement of the objects in the picture plane, the relationship or space between objects and their shadows are more intent and relevant than the objects themselves. This displacement of the common function of realism takes us into an enigmatic sphere that is ambiguously tranquil.

For Lerner, painting takes on the aspect of a Zen garden where the rocks, shells, leaves, gourds, bones and twigs have a calculated casualness in their placement and are objects of contemplation rather than description. His landscapes are as much still lifes as the natural object keepsakes from his Maine summers. In these the organic is frozen in quiet light as though he was attempting to deter the passage of time through reflective detachment. In all his paintings he is translating realism, or more precisely nature, into a type of evanescence that is reminiscent in attitude, if not in kind, to Rothko's atmospheric explorations.

This dematerializing quality in his perception of form is both similar and different from his earlier Giacometti-like disintegration of figures and interiors into an atmosphere of brush strokes. Here, though his forms have become visually concrete, they seem psychologically evasive, ready to be dissolved in an arid haze that is dispersed upon his paintings. Though he vies with Pearlstein's liking for parched surface in these paintings, he does not nurture like him and other more traditional realists, the objective reality of his subject matter. For these reasons his paintings in the end are more accurately abstractions.

In the past Lerner's canvases were almost devoid of color, being primarily monochromes of a pale, cool gray blue. In these the light became so pervasive and dense as to bleach out almost all color. However, color has seeped back into his new work, not as a robust sensuous reality but more as a descriptive tint that will not intrude on or disrupt the quietude nor the careful formal design. In these paintings color serves to remind us of the "realness" of the objects without emphasizing it.

Like several Chicago realists Lerner's realism is introspective, less formally confrontational than that seen in New York. Even in his larger scale work Lerner exhibits the strong Chicago trait of personal intimacy and the insistence upon the psychological imperative of visual perception.

There is an element of mystery and unease in Lerner's painting which is compelling but not threatening. In them there is a strained peace that dwells in a restful but alienated place.

Devonna Pieszak