



Essay from *CITY: A Journal of the City Colleges of Chicago*, 1986

## Arthur Lerner: Enigmatic Realist

Devonna Pieszak

Arthur Lerner's emergence as an artist was rooted in that era of modern art which still viewed art as a consequence of personal angst, when life rather than artifice was the prime motivator. That is, the artist's work evolved primarily from his existential position rather than from his generating an art object that referred to other art objects or gained its principal meaning by such a reference, such as Rauschenberg making art by erasing a de Kooning drawing.

With figurative art on the decline in New York during the late fifties and abstract expressionism the favorite style of the New York critics, Lerner was fortunate at the beginning of his career to be situated in the localized Chicago art environment, which lent sympathy to his exploration of art as self-definition and was tolerant of his concern with the figurative. The city, which has long had a commitment to subjective as well as eccentric content in art, nurtured his Kafkaesque perceptions, without defining them aesthetically.

Upon graduation from high school, Arthur Lerner studied at the School of the Art Institute with the artists Leon Golub and Seymour Rosofsky, who became founding members of the "Monster Roster." Although he was younger than many of his fellow students, who were returning veterans, his initial interest in fantasy, mythology and the psychological was typical of many Chicago artists. His art was and is in part a reflection of Chicago attitudes, which Franz Schultz has described as personal, introverted, obsessive and dwelling on privacy of feeling. However, Lerner's work evolved into more traditional formal solutions and subject matter than the Imagists of Chicago.

In his earliest work, we can see Lerner's initial commitment to the figure as matrix of expressive meaning—an absorption which was to continue through the seventies. At first, he was attracted to the work of the figurative "Boston Expressionists" Jack Levine and Hyman Bloom, who were in turn influenced in part by Chaim Soutine. Their appeal was partially their use of Jewish religious subjects, which Lerner explored briefly, as in "Moses and the Burning Bush," but their principal attraction was their assertive emotional expression, the empathy he felt toward their psychological state. It is also apparent that their complex and compressed compositions were not as influential as their subject matter, color and gestural expressiveness.

This first period of Lerner's work was marked by "jewel tones" as well as heavy, dark umber coloration. In his exploration of exotic subject matter, he turned for inspiration to Greek mythology, the Bible and Eastern sources, as can be seen in his use of the phoenix and of the peacock. Also, Lerner often concentrated in his early work upon a single figure, bird or man, which was a rejection of pictorial complexity—a rejection that lasted many years and was symptomatic of an absorption in self-identification. In fact, his work in the first few years seems preoccupied by a search for an image and a style that could be an equivalent of his quest for meaning and identity.

In a short time, Lerner abandoned the "dense atmosphere," the deep coloration, of these initial works without rejecting their expressive point of view. In the early 1960s, Lerner took the cadaver as his subject, an image which had been explored by Bloom and Soutine, and most provocatively by Francis Bacon, whose agonized images of cadavers and tortured contorted figures were "symbols of rage" to Lerner. Bacon's compositions were sparser than Bloom's or Levine's and focused the emotional content more single-mindedly on the anguish of the figure, which would appeal to Lerner's innate perceptions, even though he would not equal pictorially Bacon's emotional ferocity.

In Lerner's work, the solitary cadaver-like figure that fills the canvas is disemboweled and, in anguish, throws back his head and emits a primal scream. Although he was soon to leave this weighty, obvious expressive content, it is indicative of his view of man as an alienated creature seeking to define a psychological space to inhabit. This emotional and artistic space later became more evasive and ambiguous though no less anxious and alienated. It is also apparent that Lerner, with the cadaver paintings, was leaving the realm of color and settling upon tonality or value as sufficient to convey meaning.

The strokes of paint in the cadaver paintings, more controlled than the agitated gestures of his artistic mentors, were echoed more delicately in his drawings, where the rage was muffled and the heads and figures were "modelled in an atmospheric way" by subtle cross-hatching influenced by Degas. In this way, the expressionism was diffused, and Lerner began to define the figure in a more "heroic" manner, motivated by the figures of Michelangelo and classicism. While still experiencing angst, the cry of the figure's despair seems stifled, the figure lies mute. Suppressed and internalized, even civilized, the figure is brought under control by a classical, rational definition, which gives it a sense of dignity in the midst of its isolation. Heads may look as though they are shouting, figures may twist or

be bound or lie in a vulnerable fetal position, but their plight seems attenuated and private, their despair enigmatic and inaudible.

It is in his drawings that Lerner first effectively displays his passion for luminosity that evokes the impressionistic concern for defining form with light and atmosphere. In fact, his consistent emphasis upon light becomes the most pervasive quality in his work and eventuates in a highly personal luminescence. This sensitivity to light emerges in his early painting as the figure fluxes in soft brush strokes.

The lure that merging form and atmosphere had for Lerner in the late 60's was given more impetus by his preoccupation with the paintings of the sculptor Alberto Giacometti. In Giacometti, Lerner found a mentor allied to him aesthetically and emotionally, an artist who was obsessively defining his personal and introverted art and man's condition and environment. Giacometti's work was less fervidly expressive, more detached than Bacon or Bloom, therefore more in harmony with Lerner's perceptions. Concentrating upon the isolated figure in space, continuously defining and redefining itself as brush stroke, or gesture, Giacometti's paintings were distinctly linked with Lerner's expression of form as melding with brush strokes. In both artists' work, but most particularly in Lerner's, substantiality and concreteness are displaced in the diffusion of light. Besides their conspicuous use of line or gestural mark, they share an emphasis on tonality, and this suppression of color usually results in an unobtrusive pale hue.

In Lerner's paintings, which are less resolved and more faltering than Giacometti's, the figure wavers between disintegration into brush strokes and portions of anatomy being recalled from obliteration and made dimensional and solid. These lonely, blue-gray figures are viewed at an emotional distance where the observer watches the immobilized figure flirt with dematerialization. These indefinable beings uncertain of their true form are caught in a state of constant transmutation.

The indefinable void encompassing his figures is altered in part during two years in New York at the end of the 60's. An involvement with Zen philosophy at this time gave Lerner a new perspective on nature, and during painting trips to Vermont he placed the solitary figure in a gestural landscape where it seems strange, inactive, lost or in awe of the immensity of space. At this time he also did impressionistic landscapes faintly tinted with color, but they are generally amorphous, tentatively congealed masses of brush strokes faltering in their definition of form. The paintings of mountains are more successful as they toy, as did the earlier figures, with dimensional description. Probably the best work from this period, however, is the series of still lifes of gourds in which the sense of space is more confined and graspable.

On his return to Chicago, his work, still retaining its likeness to Giacometti, was marked by a turn outward, away from complete self absorption. Now the figure or a chair is placed in an interior, symptomatic of a growing interest in perspective and space. Though the figure defines its place in an environment with less hesitation, the form is still evasive, the space ambiguous, and gesture is paramount. It is not until 1975 that Lerner's work takes on a new conviction and reality that indicates the more assured direction his work has taken

since. At this point, the figure finally loses its tentativeness and begins to coalesce into tangible form.

One of the first drawings (eventually turned into a painting) that indicates a fundamental change is the foreshortened reclining figure of a woman done in 1975. The figure still exists in an atmosphere of gestural strokes, but it is no longer as vague or alienated. This self-contained figure, preserving a sense of privacy and mystery, is allowed to retain its dimension and its definition in space; its sensual appeal is explicit. In the engaging self-portraits done in the next two years, Lerner echoes the earlier figures that waver between dematerialization and definition.

However, in these frontal portraits Lerner has sharpened the focus and specified the identity of the figure as well as solidified the form. In these paintings, the figure allows itself to be more frankly explored and to be described realistically. The viewer is still destabilized by the seated figure's unreal, artificial sitting upon air rather than on a chair or by only portions of the figure-head and hands-materializing, but what is there is less elusive. However, there is also a sense that the figure may withdraw at any time into the gestural atmosphere that surrounds it.

In these works, Lerner seems to be exploring ways in which to resolve the conflicting ideas of the explicit/objective and the intangible/subjective that are the figure's essence. In these portraits, it is as though Lerner has emerged from several years of introspection to face the personality that has evolved, to describe to himself (as these works remain remote and private) the essence of that exploration. What is also evolving is a commitment to realism.

His clarified perception is also seen in the paintings "Laura I" and "Laura II," where the well-defined figure stands or sits, without being unduly abstruse, in an environment that, though still vague, is in the process of becoming specific. The three seated portraits of friends done at this time are similar to his self-portraits but are more totally realistic. One of these friends is allowed the comfort of a chair, which seems to signal the final acknowledgement of the self existing in a tangible environment as well as in a subjective one. It also signals Lerner's growing interest in exploring pictorial structure.

In 1976, a trip to the French Maritime Alps gave particular impetus to Lerner's commitment to realism. Here, while drawing the mountains, he became more forcibly aware of describing the precision of form as defined by light. He had had a similar response to the American West a year earlier, but it was not until his return from Europe that he set upon a precise course of realistic description. The clarity of it dispelled the evasive atmosphere in his painting and the reliance upon gesture.

During a stay on the Maine coast, where he was to spend several summers, Lerner unleashed this new sense of meticulous, controlled form and pictorial structure in paintings of coastal rocks and the sea. However, the most striking example of his new found clarity is the final self-portrait done in 1978. In this painting, the nude artist stands, objectively observing, as a precise form defined by a clear light -no alienation, angst or sense of privacy obtrudes. Though this degree of explicitness without a vestige of mystery

is atypical, it demonstrates Lerner's new grasp of the solidity of form and his departure from the amorphous nature of his prior work.

Lerner's new focus was to be primarily upon nature, and it is as though this portrait typified not only an aesthetic shift but was the consummation of self realization. It is also understandable that, after years of exploring the figure, he had come to a place that called for new insights. One of the major ones was sublimating the emotional content into an essence of light. It is a light that seems to come from the artist's presence rather than from a real source, and consequently he is able to retain an equivocal content while his images become more realistic.

Before his complete absorption in nature, he did several paintings of paper bags that, like the self-portrait, were principally concerned with analyzing light as it crosses a form's surface. This series was inspired by his observation of mountains and rocks in light and on his return to the city was a means of simulating the movement of light on rocks that had become a fascination. They are also a reminder, in their stark simplicity, of the solitariness that Lerner has always portrayed. The unadorned image is usually shown frontally and in simple compositions, even when the paper bags are shown in multiples. Complexity is confined to the intricate facets of light and shadow produced by the variable crumplings of the bags.

Lerner's new realistic focus was concurrent with the emergence of the "New Realists" in the 60's and 70's. These realists were not pursuing the existential aims of the earlier figurative artists of the 40's and 50's but had embraced modernism, and often their work established its initial critical acceptance by the critic's and the artist's ability to focus upon formal elements, the abstract constructions of color, light and form, rather than exclusively upon psychological or narrative content or on reproducing reality. This formal emphasis gave the realists a foot in the avant garde door, something that had eluded them until then.

Certainly Lerner's new concentration on formal elements was in concert with the "New Realist" painters. There is a compatibility in particular with the painter Philip Pearlstein's precise, dry forms and his arid light, as well as his notion of cropping images.

However, regardless of Lerner's concentration on the abstract formal elements, his paintings retain a distinctly personal ambiance. Though the objects he paints are cast in a searing light, the paintings themselves seem to emit a protective atmospheric veil, as though the light is between the viewer and the objects in the painting. Hence, their realism is only apparent, for the impregnable essence is at variance with realism's supposed objectivity. Frozen in the distinct aura of this light, the paintings enter an enigmatic sphere that's ambiguously tranquil. Unlike the naturalistic reality of more traditional realists, Lerner's realism is introspective and inscrutable, and objects seem irreparably separated from their natural context. In this way, he has merged the explicit with the intangible.

His treatment of light is often enhanced by his insistent use of Payne's gray as the principal coloration. This subdued blue hued gray contracts, withdrawing the forms into silence and

privacy where they remain constrained and cool. The familiarity we feel toward real objects, which would be heightened by local color, is contradicted and inhibited.

In 1980, Lerner began a series of paintings that took off from the minimalist paper bags. In this series, which was expanded upon in the next four years, his paintings assume the abstract aspect of a Zen garden in which the rocks, sticks, stones, shells, leaves, gourds and bones-the remnants of Maine summers-have a calculated casualness in their placement and become objects of contemplation rather than description. The voids between the objects become as significant as the objects themselves. The relationship between the objects is one of often unlike things set down as single entities that acknowledge one another's presence without losing their distinctness or separateness. Each item is uniquely itself in a unique situation related only by its arbitrary placement. There is no pictorial contention or hierarchy.

These carefully articulated still lifes began with simple rocks that were near in character to the paper bags, but rather than strictly frontal they are viewed on a tipped up plane from above. Each rock is a player in a formal contrivance that creates a tense interaction in a quiet balancing game. During the next four years, color seeps back into his painting and the arrangements become more sophisticated and varied, the objects more disparate. The color evolves, not as a robust sensuous reality, but as a descriptive tint that does not intrude or disrupt the careful formal design. In these paintings, color serves to remind us of the "realness" of the objects without emphasizing it. Emotionally these still lifes typify the isolation felt among strangers who are in close but not intimate or friendly kinship. The only communality these objects have is their being transfixed in Lerner's saturated light. These paintings seem, regardless of their reality, hermetic works awaiting decoding; their innate mystery remains indecipherable.

Concurrent with these still lifes, Lerner has been working on a series of landscapes based on his summers spent on the Maine coast. These coastscapes, rather than lush depictions of rock, sea and sky, are seen through Lerner's veil of light which spreads its parched lumination across the paintings.

They were begun like the still lifes as studies in gray-blue, but soon local color asserted itself, though typically handled in a low keyed manner. His prime interest is rather the facets of light and shadow on rocks and trees and the pattern of reflections in water. There is still a sense of form being broken up that has characterized his art from the beginning, but here he retains the solidity of the forms and their realistic identity while the atmosphere created by light remains paramount.

In these landscapes, he often focuses upon a large mass of rock set diagonally in the foreground with the intimation of the vast expanse of sea and sky behind, existing as a beckoning or mesmeric essence or void so that the deep dimensional space we might expect is vaporized rather than defined realistically. This recalls the manner in which he depicted the figure in a void in his earlier work, but here there is simultaneously a sense of a real object in real space. The rock seems a dependable earthy anchor from which to view the sublime, the mystical or the infinite.

At other times, the landscape is perceived more frontally with less depth, the bands of sea, rock and sky running horizontally to the picture plane. In these, Lerner follows his natural inclination to treat space as shallow and non-illusionistic. The cropped image often fills the picture plane, and the viewer's eye moves across and up and down the surface rather than being drawn in and out of deep space. The viewer takes an intimate stroll across the surface of the landscape, contemplating the complex, abstract patterns arrested in the artist's veil of light. Lerner's classic vision of nature makes it a quiet place where the soul if not liberated is at least restored to a measure of peace. As usual, there remains an intangible, unresolved mystery, a strained tranquility that dwells in a restful place.

In Lerner's work, there has been a constancy of perception as well as a steady evolution. The marks of a journey toward self knowledge are apparent in many ways, and his art has been as much an act of self-definition as it has been the discovery and definition of form. Like several Chicago realists, Lerner's realism is introspective and less formally confrontational than that seen in New York. Even in his larger scale work, he reveals the strong Chicago trait of personal intimacy and the insistence upon the psychological imperative in visual perception.

In contrast to the "what you see is what you get" objective realism, which often excludes subjective content and exults in the outward sense of things, Lerner has been able to bring to realism a subjective dimension and a sense of mystery. His is a realism that is introspective and ultimately enigmatic.