



# chicago cultural center

MICHIGAN AVENUE GALLERIES AT THE CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER

## In Transition: Paintings by Arthur Lerner

Arthur Lerner is well-known as one of Chicago's finest representational artists, and particularly for his landscapes and still life paintings. In this current body of work he concentrates on the more disturbing theme of mummified humans, inspired by his visit to the Mummy Museum in Guanajuato, Mexico. This theme of life and death has afforded Lerner the opportunity to make a breakthrough in expressive content, as well as to demonstrate his ample talents as a painter.

Lerner works from either his own or from pre-existing photographs of the Guanajuato mummies and takes varying degrees of liberties with the figures. Some have been distorted and compositionally cropped to emphasize emotional expression, much like the German Expressionists did some ninety years earlier. Lerner also supplies new contexts in the form of painterly "color field" backgrounds, which emphasize the stark isolation of these figures, much like the "arenas" of the late British artist Francis Bacon's anguished portraits. For these areas, Lerner chooses muted terracotta and desert-like colors that call to mind the landscape of the culture from which he has abstracted these figures.

A Mexican view of life and death has definitely inspired the emotional content in these haunting works; Lerner is sensitive to the beauty of decay and the fuller range of feeling invoked by death - from tragic to comic. We are thus seen variously as puppets in the game of life, or as pure physical matter, or as tortured souls. Perhaps inspired by the state of preservation of the Guanajuato mummies, Lerner's skeletal figures often blend life and death into an ambiguous state of delicate animation and expressive grace.

Lerner received a B.F.A. in 1951 and his M.F.A. in 1952 from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has taught at various institutions in Chicago and been the recipient of several grants and awards, most notably a National Endowment for the Arts Award in 1980/81. His work is in several public and private collections including The Art Institute of Chicago and the Koffler Collection, National Collection of Fine Arts (Smithsonian Collection), Washington, D.C. His work has been in several exhibitions in the Midwest, and he is represented locally by Jan Cicero Gallery and Printworks, the latter of which is exhibiting Lerner's drawings concurrently with this exhibition.