



# chicago cultural center

## Essay from exhibition, 2005

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 the 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 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 Frances 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.

Lannie Silverman, Curator, Chicago Cultural Center