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Mistiness and Insight

The Landscapes and Still Lives of Chicago Realist Arthur Lerner

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Arthur Lerner is a veteran Chicago realist in a town that honors cartoonists, so his achievement has never been fully recognized—the Museum of Contemporary Art has excluded him from its current survey—and infrequent gallery exhibitions are the sole means a viewer has to keep up on him.

Lerner's show of recent paintings, at the Jan Cicero Gallery, is only his second local outing of the decade, but because it includes work in his two favorite categories, landscape and still life, it turns out to be an excellent introduction to an artist who rightly should not need one.

The still lifes are of gourds and plants and antlers and skulls arranged on a bluish-white surface in Lerner's studio. He used to paint them under natural light, but as one of the canvases has shadows indicating the illumination comes from more than one direction, some artificial light has crept in as a supplement.

Apart from that, and the bluish tint to surfaces that once were vanilla-white, the paintings are much the same as they were 20 years ago, meaning exquisitely arranged, wonderfully tense in the spaces between objects, and inexplicably muted as if viewed through a mist or scrim.

This quality, which achieves beautifully subtle effects with the colors of Lerner's objects, characterized his paintings long before the artist began spending summers on a mist-shrouded island in Maine. So it does not seem based in an observed phenomenon of Nature, even if it gives viewers the impression that an unusually dense fog mediates between the still life and the sun.

Lerner's Maine "coastsapes," shown at Cicero In 1988, had the same bright but veiled quality and a naturalistic source, for there the agent was almost palpably mist. But now the artist applies it to the arid, rocky American West, making his light an artistic fiction in works that are based on verifiable fact.

The effect is not as dramatic as in some of the Maine pictures, where light seemed to transform the landscape, giving shadows the solidity of rock and rock the buoyancy of snow. Now it merely tones down Lerner's color and, in one instance, flattens an area of landscape that would otherwise thrust toward us.

However, such evening-out clearly gives satisfaction to the artist, for the oil sketches he works from— several are on view—do not have it and are sometimes also comparatively raucous in color.

It's important to regard Lerner's mistiness, then, as a way of seeing rather than just an artificial application reserved for large, finished pieces. There's a certain amount of "atmosphere" in it, but that apparently isn't what it's for.

Because of the way it bleaches and harmonizes Lerner's work, it's probably his revenge against the gaucheries of Nature, for as James Whistler believed, a beautiful representation of a landscape will always be more beautiful than the real thing.

That Lerner is the only contemporary representational painter from Chicago to whom that might apply should say a lot: He's an aesthete in a town dominated by tenpenny fantasists.

The second show at Cicero this month is devoted to panoramic landscapes by painter Diane Canfield Bywaters, who uses the VistaVision format skillfully without having it force her in directions that would immediately suggest a gimmick.

Bywaters' compositions look natural and do not "play" to the format in any ways that draw undue attention to it. Viewers will have the sense that a lot of her work took place at the stage of selection, for the sights she presents clearly are comfortable in the wide-screen layout.

As with Lerner, the artist works from the motif. But, taken as a whole - the studies with the finished pieces - her paintings convey more the feeling of having patiently and directly transcribed Nature rather than having made an effort to reorder it according to quirks of personality (At Jan Cicero Gallery, 221 W. Erie St., through Feb. 8.)