

ARTSPEAK by Marty Fugate | Arts & Entertainment Editor

The long strange trip of Leslie Lerner

Leslie Lerner was a Brooklyn Dodgers fan, who felt the decline of American civilization began when the Dodgers moved to L.A. in 1958. Lerner also was a clever, energetic, perceptive, political, introspective, poetic, subtle and sure-handed painter. The one thing he wasn't was maudlin. Lerner died last year. He wouldn't have made a big deal about it.

Let's talk about his art.

Lerner's paintings have an unsettled, off-balance quality. Their settings are enigmatic and at odds with their labels. He'd call a series "My Life in France" — but the landscape would look more like "My Life on Mars." Something is happening, but it's about to turn into something else. A boy looks out of the painting's frame; a man looks down at a dog nipping at his heels. These are moments in time. They're not eternal.

Like "The Odyssey," or "Huckleberry Finn," Lerner's paintings show you

recurring characters on a journey. You don't know where they started out from or if they'll ever get home again. Imagine a series of illustrations ripped out of "The Odyssey" and arranged out of order. Here, Ulysses is shooting arrows at a bunch of guys in a house. There, he drives a stake into the eye of a Cyclops. Why? There are no answers, just scenes.

Lerner's paintings are like that: fragments of narrative, but no thread.

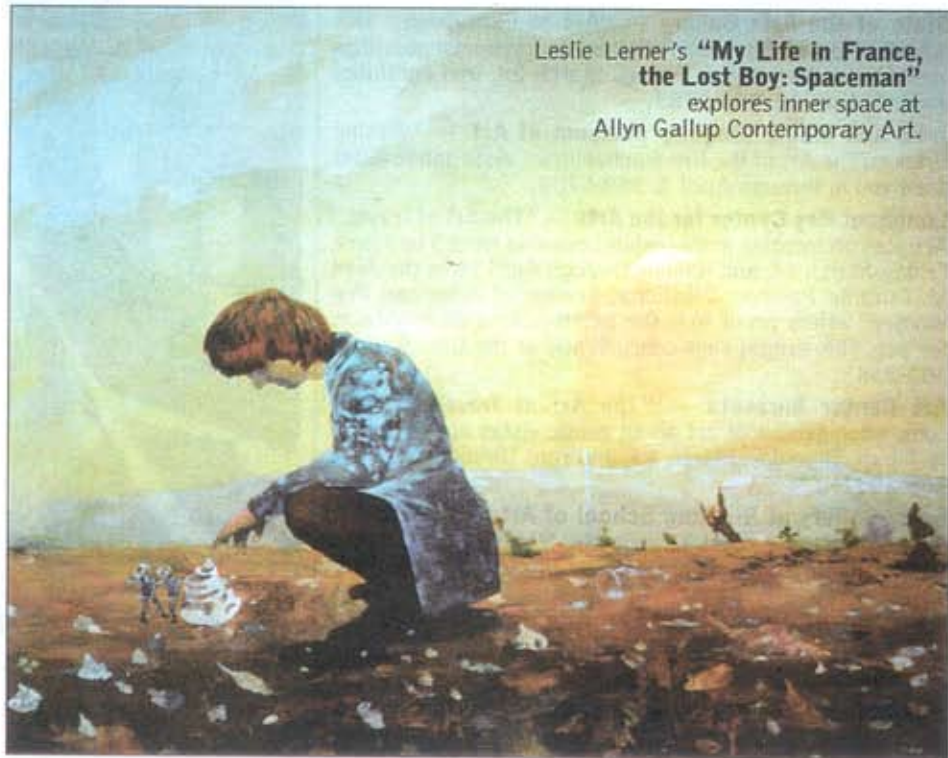
These narratives do have their own set of heroes. Instead of brave Odysseus, you get the "Man with the Wooden Arm." Instead of Huck, he gives you the "Lost Boy." In a supporting role, there's an unnamed donkey. What are they up to?

In "My Life in France, the Lost Boy: Spaceman," the Lost Boy character (perhaps a cousin of "The Little Prince") kneels to talk with two tiny astronauts in space helmets. Their spaceship has a seashell's spiral shape. The foreground of the desolate landscape is littered with shells. Is he just imagining this?

Posing questions without answers is easy enough. That's a trick — but Lerner wasn't playing tricks. He had a reason for what he was doing.

Incompleteness opens the doors of perception. Not knowing where you are makes you see with open eyes. Like the sight of a new town on a road trip. Like the sight of your hometown when you return, the first few seconds of strangeness you see before your brain realizes *oh, this is familiar*, and you stop seeing it.

Lerner's characters were on a journey. By not defining that journey, he forced you to look at the strangeness of the moments along the way:



Leslie Lerner's "My Life in France, the Lost Boy: Spaceman" explores inner space at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art.

catalogue

'LESLIE LERNER' 'SUSAN ZUKOWSKY'

Where and when?

Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art
556 S. Pineapple Ave., Sarasota
through April 1

For more information call
366-2093.

A glimpse of a valley. A wild dog.

All the moments most people miss on life's journey because they're only thinking about the next destination.

Lerner didn't miss a thing.

While you're here, don't miss the companion exhibit of Susan Zukowsky's mixed-media constructions. Her art forms a sharp counterpoint to Lerner's work. Where he creates flux, she creates stasis. Where he creates enigmas, she creates icons: a wistful vignette of a woman's face looking out of a oval hole

in a red box in "Camouflage of War" or the haunting image of a bunny rabbit forever trapped inside a sphere of glass in "Prisoner of Love." There is no time or possibility of change in her constructions. Everything is terrifyingly complete — and completely bound in the recurring image of a cage, container or trap. These traps hint of the traps human beings create for ourselves — war, bad relationships, the clenched fist of memory.

Why we create these traps in the first place remains an open question.



COURTESY PHOTO

Leslie Lerner in his studio.

A lasting impression

Painter's worldview lives on in his art

By KEVIN COSTELLO
CORRESPONDENT

The tragic death last September at age 55 of painter Leslie Lerner, a master with work in the permanent collections of New York's Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Art and the Corcoran Museum of Art in Washington, D.C., still reverberates through the Sarasota community.

He was not only the most important national artist in this region, he was also one of the most influential teachers of contemporary art this city has ever seen. For 15 years, he taught and mentored students at the Ringling School of Art and Design.

The paintings in "Leslie Lerner: The Florida Years" at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art are not swan songs, because Lerner's paintings will continue to live and enrich generations to come.

Jill Lerner, his widow and curator of the show, hopes visitors will feel "Leslie's ability to explain our complicated world with his exquisite point."

A gregarious conversationalist, Lerner embraced the polemics of art with a command of the subject. His etchings, sculpture, ceramics and paintings contain the two essential characteristics evident in significant art: formal and historical transgressions.

The first concerns the re-arrangement of compositional devices established by antecedents. The second addresses the very nature of the purpose of aesthetics and redirects viewers toward a new awareness of current philosophy as expressed in art: changing the way we see the world.

Lerner's phantasmagorical postmodern landscapes are peopled by Lilliputians, giants and spaceships, or, as in his last paintings, a forlorn and obdurate donkey striding across a desert wasteland of soldiers and billowing black clouds. Painting an

PLEASE SEE LERNER ON 2G

Art review

"Leslie Lerner: The Florida Years"

On display through April 1 at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art, 556 S. Pineapple Ave., Sarasota. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Call 366-2093 or access www.miramararts.com.

Leslie Lerner's worldview lives on in the painter's art

LERNER FROM 1G

autobiography, he was the donkey in a quest to articulate conceptual theater.

Lerner's paintings never left the principal intent of conceptualism, which is to give primacy to ideas expressed visually.

Lerner expropriated figures for his landscapes from Goya and Watteau, and, to use his own words, "borrowed the donkey from the 17th-century Italian Annibale Carracci." From Goya, he distilled the darkness of inhuman behavior; from Watteau, the delicate sadness

of a scene as the modern world breaks in upon it.

The donkey is a metaphor for his own psyche.

Too soon, this original artist has left the stage of visual thinking, and yet the light he painted is still on. The things he wished us to consider remain, as in his last work, which dealt with the uncomfortable realities of Pax Americana.

Realizations about the contemporary world urgently demand the attention and explication of poets. In our part of the world, Lerner was one of them, and certainly one of the best.

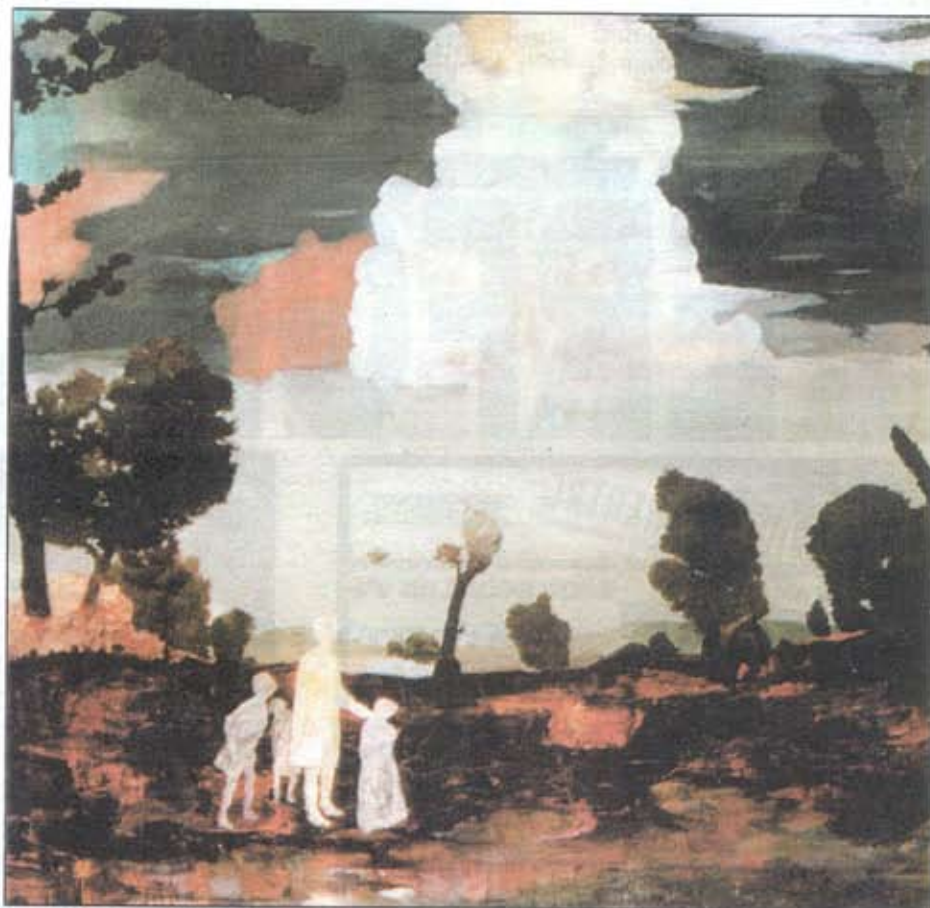
Recent work on view by Lerner, Schaaf and Zukowsky

MARK ORMOND

About Art



A capsule-like survey of Leslie Lerner's work is on view at Allyn Gallup Contemporary on Pineapple this month. Lerner passed away last fall, and left a rich legacy of work in a variety of media. This show reflects the comprehensiveness of his experimentation in works on paper, painting, and in three-dimensional forms. There are examples from his "My Life in France Series" that are lush and densely rich paintings. "UFO Winter House" captures the cold light of winter with deft brush marks



Leslie Lerner's work is on view at Allyn Gallup Contemporary on Pineapple.

that also make clouds. It is evident from this show that Lerner loved to paint – to move it on the surface of plastic or rag board or canvas. He liked to work colors in and around other colors. He was a master at invention and re-invention, creating brush marks specifically to achieve his intent. In "The Lost Boy, Psychedelic Ghost Heart #893," he mixes cool blues and greens with flame reds and browns, causing us to want to lose ourselves in the power of his brush. A quietly startling series of 7-by-7-inch acrylic-on-rag board panels follows the journey of a donkey through a war-torn landscape, where the animal is both a witness and a victim to various atrocities.

Susan Zukowsky is sharing the space with Lerner at Gallup. Zukowsky is well known for her seductive collages that combine two- and three-dimensional materials in exquisite frameworks. Her work is elegant, delicate and restrained. She mixes paper with materials such as feathers, leaves, pearls and netting. Her composites often reference major monuments such as the Ara Pacis in

Rome. In "Ice Box," she has attached crystals of sweat on the outside of the structure. In "Camouflage of War," a great teardrop lays on the edge of the frame. Behind the glass, beyond the delicate gold netting and through the oval cut in a pumpkin fabric mat, we see the face of a woman with a tear streaming down her cheek while around her swirl the skeletons of lacy dead leaves. Like Joseph Cornell's boxes, Zukowsky's constructs establish an intimacy with the psyche of the viewer that takes us far from the realities of this world.

Also at Gallup are a few new sculptures by William Schaaf. "Old Man Acque," made of clay wood-fired with gold leaf and turquoise on marble, is a form that resembles a pre-historic horse sculpture. It is earthy and romantic and looks very much like a precious artifact mounted on its marble base. His work reminds us how far we have come in more than 10,000 years – and how much our primal response to nature and natural materials remains unchanged.

MONKEY SEE

Leslie Lerner's paintings recall the compositional grandeur of artists Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, who documented unfamiliar places for the 19th-century American. His elegantly mannered figures are like those of Watteau, who painted a fantasy world of idyllic landscapes for the elite of 18th-century France. The powerful presence of a well-defined tree reminds us of Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini's similar choice to focus the viewer's attention. The total integration of these references, combined with his own narrative devices, positions Sarasota's Lerner as one of the most interesting of contemporary artists.

Here he presents an extraordinary vista from a rocky promontory populated by two creatures. A dark-haired figure that appears to be a man gestures toward the scene below. A monkey seated behind him seems pensively possessed by the view. The distant horizon line is craggy with peaks of mountains and rock formations constructed with glazes of color. From foreground to distant background, the landscape evolves from cool blue grays to creamy ochers tinged with green. Miles away a river snakes through the valley, and a small dwelling defines itself on the banks. Somewhere in the middle distance is a single elegant tree establishing a point of interest and perspective.

Lerner's paintings connect us to universes we might encounter as well as those only he could imagine. His work is on view at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art. —Mark Ormond



Leslie Lerner's *Monkey Guide*, one of several Lerner paintings you can view at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art on Pineapple Avenue.