

'Donkeyland' mirrors world events

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CORRESPONDENT

SARASOTA — "Donkeyland," a new series by Leslie Lerner at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art/Mira Mar Gallery, advances the artist's earlier efforts to revitalize narrative painting.

In this exhibit, the artist's psyche is represented by the image of a forlorn but still obdurate donkey wandering in a barren wilderness littered with debris. The creature's lowered head has a steady gaze as it saunters toward the viewer, and, by implication, the difficulties of the world.

Lerner suggests the animal is a harbinger of a universal state of mind concerning the dark paths of current world events — specifically, war.

The artist's devices for these non-sequential contemporary parables begin with roiling cloud formations in the drawings or high, sunny wisps of cloud in the paintings, reminiscent of the 19th-century Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner.

Below, fantastical landscapes in the drawings and the bright color of the landforms in the paintings make reference to the late 17th-century, early 18th-century French Rococo painter Watteau. This unusual combination of styles serves to create a psychologically disjunctive but believable staged drama, which must resolve itself beyond the art in the viewer's imagination.

The intention of "Donkeyland" is to address the geopolitical absurdities of our time — not from the heady heights of history painting, but through the measured gray scale of char-

coal and the chromatic cadences and comportment of form once realized in the lightness of Watteau's painting.

The donkey as the artist representative is lost in the dismal terrain of the present, but resolute in his instinctual foresight to move on and traverse the present on his way to a more hopeful future.

Through these appropriations of art history reference and Lerner's virtuosity as a draftsman and painter, the political and emotional content of his art conjoin and become their own unique achievement.

The landscape represents to

the artist the dreams and failed imaginings of contemporary American life; a culture, according to the artist, lost in the fabrications of the "American Theme Park." It's a myopic and greedy culture bereft of emotional depth and the patience and foresight that come from historical perspective.

This is well-executed, professional art that distills the history of visual conventions in the service of contemporary relevancy, expressions that use both sides of experience — the nostalgic, insulated self-image and the changes visited upon that self-image due to the consequences of hard world news.

For many artists, recombination of several historical styles of painting usually leads to a lack of focus. In Lerner's case, appropriations are combined to envision the new and disquieting mood of our times with calm precision.

The donkey in this series, according to the artist, is "a particular donkey in a painting" by the late 16th-century, early 17th-century Italian painter Annibale Carracci.

"I identified with this donkey, so I stole him," Lerner said. "So here we are, all of us in Donkeyland, caught up in a spectacle fueled by religion, technology, oil and revenge. Mute, saddled, led and faithful."

Lerner's new drawings and paintings superimpose art history and current affairs on a self-image that, like the donkey, suffers the long-term consequences of ill-considered foreign economic and military adventures.

His donkey is an icon of those lost in the theme park, relying on common sense to find a clear exit before the lights go out and the way home is lost forever.



COURTESY PHOTO

"My Life in America: Night Donkey" by Leslie Lerner

REVIEW

Donkeyland

By Leslie Lerner.
Showing through April 3
at Allyn Gallup
Contemporary Art/Mira
Mar Gallery, 1284 N.
Palm Ave., Sarasota.
Gallery hours are 10 a.m.
to 5 p.m. Monday
through Saturday. Call
366-2093 or access
www.miramart.com.