

A dark romanticism

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Leslie Lerner and Leslie Neumann create haunting landscapes to make you think. The mysterious atmosphere of their works seems independent of time - or the weather.

Lerner recently moved to Florida from California and teaches painting at the Ringling School of Art and Design. He paints water, which for him "serves as a vehicle, literally and narratively, to pursue a 16-year-old journey through our American experiences."

His works are dark; appropriate for dealing with environmental issues. On a symbolic level, darkness is negative; on a realistic level, it shows a world that has blotted out the sun.

In *A River of Ink*, Lerner shows us a riverside city with just enough familiarity to spark recognition. But the river is blue-black; it is pocked with chilling craters and pierced with eerie streaks. Perhaps the water reflects the sky; perhaps it exudes its own murky color. The city is kept distant, far from our reach, even as it spurts still more pollution into the air - or are those dying flames?

Neumann is a newcomer to Florida who divides her time between studios in Aripeka and in New York City.

In works such as *Lake Titicaca III* she uses encaustic, or wax, over oil, which enables her to scratch line drawings through the wax to the undersurface. The line drawings represent a personal iconography based on ancient images such as petroglyphs, and contemporary markings such as a graffiti message: "I wear your love."

Neumann's dominant colors are blue and orange, opposites on the color wheel. They create a disturbing visual contrast, but they also ask us: What could happen to cause the Earth to glow like this? Though the landscape has depth, the line drawings exist on a flat plane as if to separate the markings of mankind from the formations of nature.

Lerner and Neumann are 20th-century romantics, far different from those of the 19th century. A century and more ago, artists painted inspiration and sentiment into works designed to carry viewers to wondrous places to which few could travel.

The new romantics reflect concern and uncertainty. Nationally renowned new romantics were introduced to bay area viewers in the show "Romance and Irony" at the Tampa Museum of Art in 1990. Like April Gornik and Mark Innerst in that exhibit, Lerner and Neumann show great expanses of glowing landscape with little or no human activity.

They awe us with visions of an ominous, incongruous world.

AT A GLANCE

What: *Alchemists of Nature: Leslie Lerner and Leslie Neumann*. Where: Clayton Galleries, 4105 S MacDill Ave., Tampa. When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, through March 23. Cost: Free. Information: 831-3753 (Tampa).