

An afternoon with Nathan Lerner

ROGER MANLEY

"So tell me," he said, "what do you think is the perfect container?"

Sitting across the kitchen table from me, the compact, bearded, almost bearlike man's eyes twinkled. The question was part riddle, part test, and obviously one he'd administered many times before. His short, thick fingers came together like a trap, but his bushy eyebrows remained raised, patiently waiting to see what I would say next.

"Well . . . what about the paper bag?" I ventured.

"Umm. Not bad, not bad," he nodded. "It's certainly simple enough. Made of one material—well, two if you count the glue—and folds up when it's not in use. And it's quickly biodegradable. But on the other hand, that means it's not very durable. Brown paper's only good for holding dry things, and nothing too heavy or pointed. Forget about anything even the slightest bit damp. So no, that's not it. It's pretty good, but not quite perfect."

It was clear he'd spent a lot of time thinking about this.

"The fifty-five gallon drum?"

"Not bad either." He was sizing me up. "But a steel drum means mines, steel mills, factories—lots of employment, but all that pollution and used-up energy, and then those drums are hard to get rid of. They can be smelted down again, but that takes fuel too. More often, they get filled with waste and buried somewhere just to rust out and leak. And unless they're empty they are pretty hard to handle with anything but a forklift. A single gallon of water weighs

almost eight and a half pounds, you know, so multiply that by fifty five, and . . ."

"I don't know, Nathan, I give up." I was feeling put on the spot. "What is the perfect container?"

He grinned the devilish grin of every triumphant riddler who manages to stump his opponent. "Think about it . . . what about the wooden barrel? The good old-fashioned barrel. Look: It's round, so it can roll easily like a steel drum. But unlike a drum, it's bigger in the middle so it rests on a single point, which means a single person pushing it can pretty easily turn and steer it any direction. Those curved sides make it easier to flip it up on end, too. And then standing up like that on a flat end, it's stable enough to be stacked with lots of other barrels."

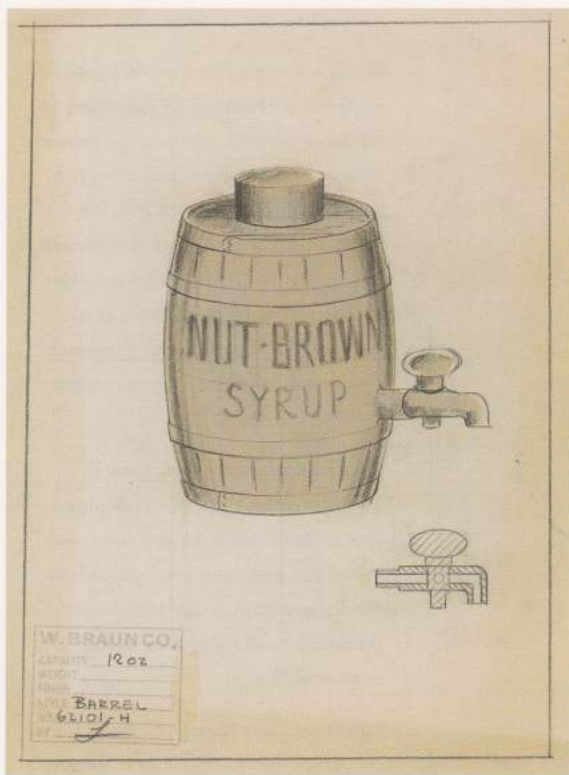
He was just getting warmed up. "You can put just about anything you want to inside—in the old days they shipped everything from Portuguese sherry to porcelain dishes that way. Even human bodies were shipped in them—all those homesick Chinese immigrants wanting to be buried back home in China. Barrels are usually reusable—well, maybe not the ones I just mentioned—but even if you don't reuse them, they are biodegradable. In fact you can burn them for fuel if need be. When you put whiskey in one, the contents just get better and better the longer it sits there. The wetter it gets, the more the wood swells, and so the less it's likely to leak, too. And best of all, they are simple enough that a skilled person with only a few handtools who knows what he's doing can

Design means but one thing: the conscious ordering of elements to achieve an end. There is no trouble with this definition. It is with the ends that confusion starts, for the quality of the ends determine the quality of the design solution. Objects should arise from real needs; too many things are now designed for almost every other reason but that.

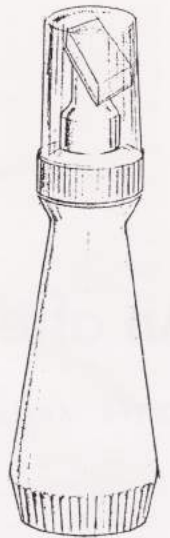
One of the most important aspects of being a good designer lies in the simple ability to know what the problem really is. Most designers cope with problems, [while] never recognizing the real problem.

Where do we start? I believe it is necessary to go back to the roots of the meaning of "needs." To ask fundamental questions again, because there is overwhelming evidence of fundamental mistakes. It seems to me that the oft-lamented cry of science outstripping itself is resolved simply into the fact that science and technology have for some time been obsessed not with needs, but with possibilities. . . . It is no longer what do I want, but what can I do?

—Nathan Lerner, 1946



Clockwise from left: Rendering for Nut-Brown Syrup container, sponge applicator for shoe polish, pump vase for hand lotion, cylinder over-cap top, accordion squeeze applicator, gallon plastic jug, roll-on applicator, ketchup squeeze bottle



build one, even in some primitive, undeveloped backwater. All he'd really need is the wood—even the hoops were made of tree roots spliced together back in the days when metal was scarce. It's just about perfect."

Nathan rattled off the list of barrel attributes with the casual speed of someone who'd been over the same ground dozens of times, which no doubt he had. He'd spent most of his career as an artist and designer, thinking about how things work, what could be improved, and when it was better to leave well enough alone. Wooden barrels obviously would have been in that last category. He had admired them so much, in fact, that he had incorporated them into some of the consumer products he had designed: syrup containers, ice buckets, several of his toys. These really didn't make practical use of the barrel's physical attributes so much as celebrate it as a form, though the subconscious associations—with things like tradition, dependability, rural casualness—were a vital part of its function.

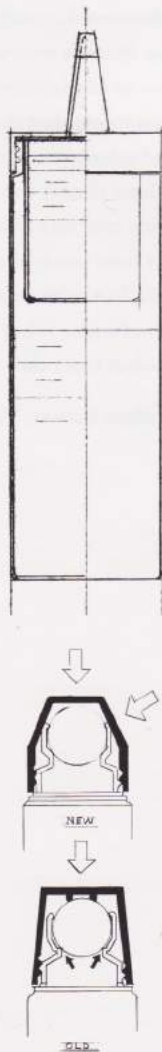
As we sat there, he continued to talk: barrels leading into containers in general. The history of civilization itself could be thought of as the history of containers, he said. After all, it was all those baskets and barrels, bags and pots (nearly all now biodegraded and vanished from the archaeological record) that had made it possible for our ancestors to move beyond roaming around gorging on killed beasts like packs of hyenas to developing real civilization.

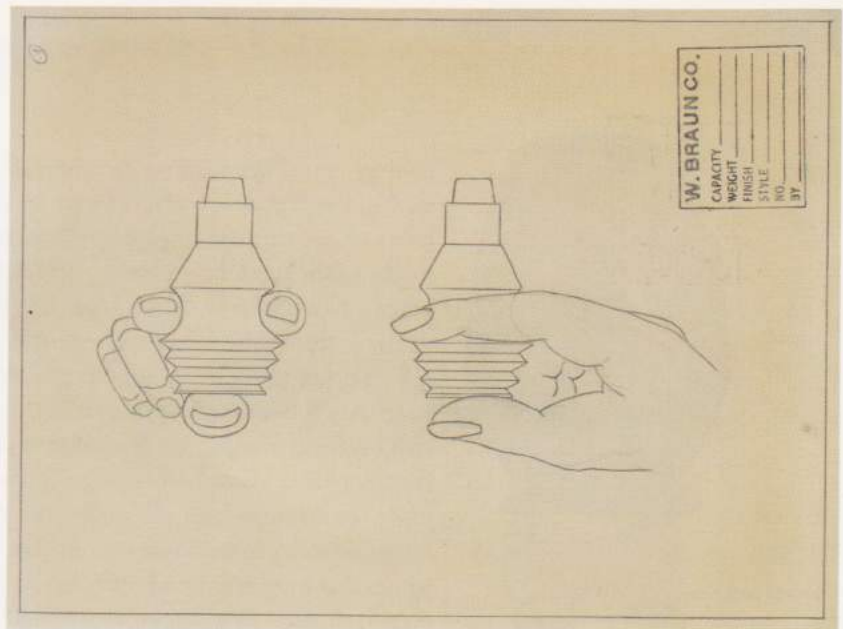
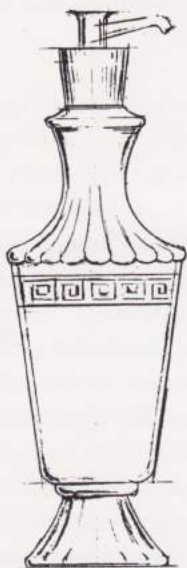
Before food storage, the lean stretches between big kills were busily occupied with frantic foraging and starvation.

It wasn't spears, he argued, but containers, which could store anything from seeds to perfumes, that eventually led to villages, to time to sit around on long winter nights telling stories and recounting sagas, to having the leisure to think up solutions to more mundane problems. So design, at its best the art of solving problems efficiently as well as elegantly, must have begun with containers and storage. After all, even clothing and shelter—after food and water the most essential human needs—could be thought of as ways to contain and conserve our own bodies.

I hadn't bargained on getting a history and design lesson when I dropped by for what was intended only to be a friendly visit that afternoon, but as a born teacher, Nathan couldn't help engaging in conversations with visitors that way sometimes. And containers were something close to Nathan's heart. He'd spent much of his career thinking about them, designing them, trying to figure out ways to make them more useful and more nearly perfect, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise that he'd get around to talking about them sooner or later.

Even now the results of his thinking are in nearly all of our houses, anonymously blending in with all the other goods in our pantries and cabinets. Each one of them originated as a problem that needed solving. For instance, it may not be a very large problem, but it is a





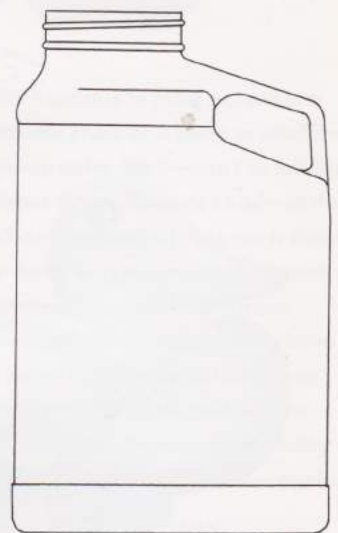
problem nonetheless, to shake thick ketchup out of a glass bottle. At some point Nathan must have gotten tired of it too, because he came up with a simple solution: Put the ketchup in a squeezable plastic bottle. Liquid deodorant presents another kind of problem: how to apply up under the arms in small-enough amounts to avoid dripping all over the place. Roll-on deodorant with a ball built into the cap was another Nathan Lerner idea. But roll-on liquid shoe polish didn't work as well: A ball rolling over a shoe's rounded surface left an unsatisfactory tangle of tracks and lines. Okay then, Lerner thought, why not mount a sponge in the cap instead, and angle it to make it easy to daub the polish on?

But some containers can be too easy to open, which can create some serious problems. If they hold pills that are better kept out of the hands of children, for instance, they might need a safety cap that will make them harder to unscrew. "Think about it!" I can almost hear him say, whether to me or to himself, every time he thought of a solution to one of these problems.

The best designs are often so simple and elegant as to seem self-evident. Is manicuring messy? Why not suspend a brush down in the nail-polish bottle, like the old glue bottles in the cabinet-makers' shops? It seems so obvious now that it's hard to believe that there was ever a time we did it any other way. What about hand cream? The squeezable bottle, so great for ketchup, isn't such a good way to deal with something you squirt directly onto your hands,

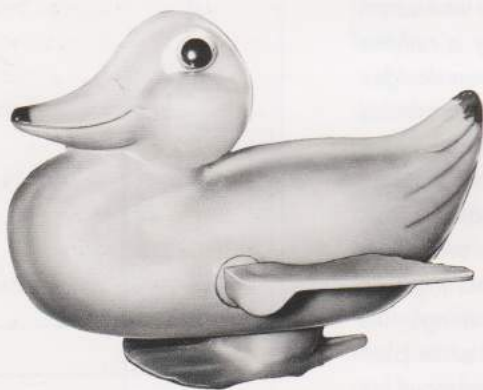
since after you use it, your hands are too slippery to keep holding onto the bottle. So maybe it's better to mount a miniature pump in the container, which is exactly what Lerner did. And liquid bleach? Those old-timey glass bottles were slippery and heavy, and every time somebody dropped one it was not only a ruinous mess for the floor or carpets but even dangerously health threatening. Lerner first patented the idea of attaching a plastic handle to the glass bottles, then found a way to moldcast the entire jug of plastic, with a built-in handle. Both solutions were successful and both are still in production, since re-sterilizable glass jugs are ecologically better for delivering things like milk (because they can be reused), while plastic jugs are safer for potentially dangerous liquids like bleach, herbicides, or glue. Lerner helped lead the way into the age of plastic, whenever plastic was the safer material.

Each of these thoughts and solutions provided seeds for others. What to do with all the little plastic tabs left over from molding those handles in bleach bottles? How about casting them inside bars of soap as core stiffeners, so the soap won't break and be wasted when it gets too thin? And after that, maybe the kids can use them to make miniature floating armadas in the bathtub! Lerner submitted a patent for this, as well as for hundreds of other ideas. If sponging-on shoe polish is such a good concept, then what about floor polish? Lerner's sponge mop not only helped maintain the glossy sheens of all the new linoleum and vinyl kitchen floors of the 1940s and '50s, but

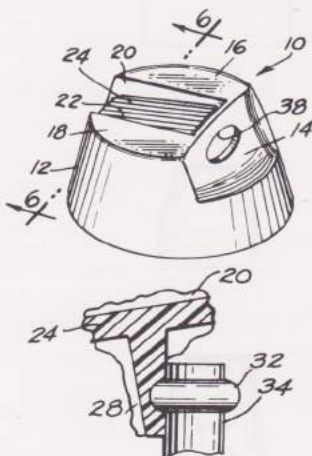




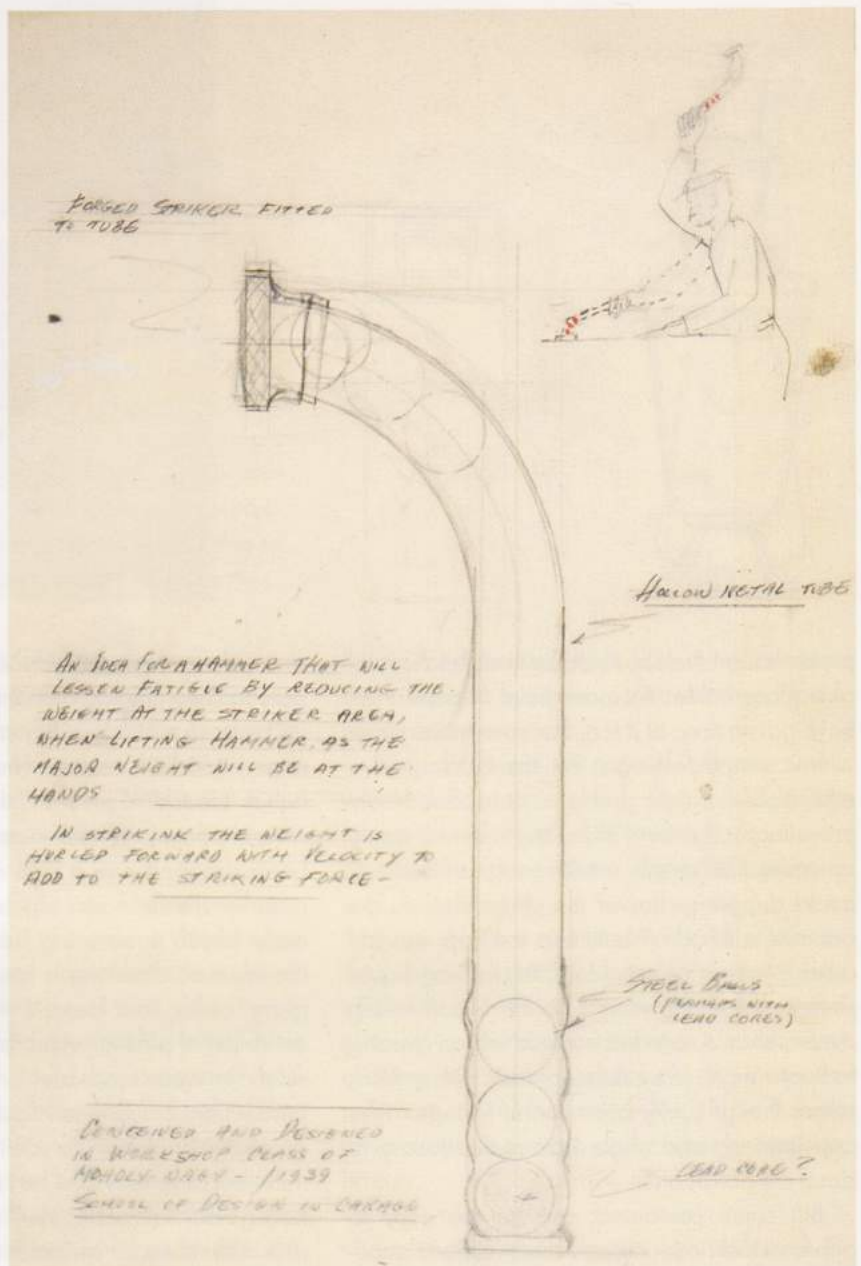
Gumball Machine Bank, c. 1960



Wacky-Quacky tub toy, 1956



Aerosol safety cap patent, 1962



looked as stream-lined as any late-model chrome-adorned car of that era. Visually, his mop almost says "Take me out for spin," promising to turn a household chore into a joy ride.

Lerner also turned his attention to toy design. Young children, he noticed, were often fascinated with brightly colored pills rattling around in medicine bottles. Their concerned parents probably wished for a safe toy to distract their attention and occupy their developing minds. Something like, say, the clear plastic push toys with colorful balls rattling around inside that Lerner designed for companies like Fisher-Price, or better yet, balls with puzzles inside, like the ones he created for Tarco Toys. But

Nathan's toys weren't just time-wasters. His use of color stimulated the toddlers visually, and the action of the toys encouraged manual dexterity. "Maneuvering balls thru holes in platforms tests control, helps teach coordination," as the promotional copy for one of these educational toys read.

And then Nathan thought about it. When the kids got a little older, he reasoned, they'd be frustrated at never being able to get inside those clear plastic balls. Well then, give them miniature bubblegum machines—but to get at the contents, they'll have to put in a coin. A toy that doubles as a piggy bank will teach them about saving. Even if they take their money out,

they'll keep the dividend of the educational experience.

Nathan Lerner was neither a Thomas Edison nor an Alexander Graham Bell; none of his inventions or patents were as massively civilization-altering as the electric light-bulb or telephone. Nevertheless, America—and everywhere that shared in the American dream in the latter half of the twentieth century—would be substantially different had he not done what he did. If we didn't have Lerner's Honeybear bottle we'd still be eating honey, but the bottle has such an iconic rightness about it that without it, our mental concept of honey just wouldn't be the same. The toys Lerner created for companies like Fisher-Price, Olympics, Tarco, Plastiglo, and Duncan (makers of the yo-yo, several of which Lerner designed); the Masonite pegboards that still line many a store display and handyman's workshop; the Thermos containers; and the home-movie equipment he designed for amateur filmmakers have all come to loom large in the collective unconscious of children who grew up during and since the post-World War II era. Anyone who ever shared a bathtub with a Wacky-Quacky rubber duck, ironed laundry with a safety iron, or spray-painted with an aerosol can has been in some measure touched by Lerner's creative imagination.

Nathan Lerner's world was full of everyday needs that begged for simple but exciting solutions. Discovering and presenting these solutions was as natural to him as breathing. Mistakes, in particular, were often translated into opportunities. For instance, when he damaged a vinyl record album in the process of getting it out of its cardboard sleeve, he had an idea about how to design better album covers. When he scratched a record with a manually lowered needle, he thought about how to create an automatic tonearm lifter for record turntables—and then he designed that too.

"Chance favors the prepared mind" goes the maxim, and Nathan Lerner's mind was unusually well prepared to take advantage of any chances that might come along. After early training as a painter, at age 24 he attended the very first classes taught at the New Bauhaus in

Chicago. At the New Bauhaus Lerner gained not only an array of manual skills ranging from furniture construction to stone carving, but also a fundamental grasp of Bauhaus ideas about how art and talent should best be applied to the solving of human problems—not least of which was opening the minds of other people. The Bauhaus philosophy had crossed the Atlantic after the teachers of the original Bauhaus fled Germany to escape the (utterly close-minded) Nazi government. The movement had given rise not only to the New Bauhaus that Lerner attended, but also to the architecture schools at universities like Harvard and Yale. In North Carolina, Black Mountain College near Asheville and the School of Design at NC State University in Raleigh both intentionally began with Bauhaus concepts at their core.

While Lerner respected the "art for art's sake" approach that many fine artists and art schools took, for him it was important that art answer a need. And for Nathan Lerner, an important need was the need to ignite the imagination. On the afternoon when he opened my eyes to the importance of containers, we were alone in his cluttered but comfortable dining room with its oriental carpets and simple wooden furniture. Nathan's house was surprisingly cozy, unstark, and—but for his own abstract paintings framed on the wall—rather traditional looking, considering his lifetime commitment to the Bauhaus legacy.

Recent ill health had weakened him a little, but every classroom he'd ever stood before was still there in his bemused and questioning voice. He kept things conversational, but he was teaching in the oldest sense of the term. Like all the best teachers, Nathan had honed an ability to imagine what it was like not to know something. This insight allowed him to break down lessons and present them in clear and understandable ways—but he framed his lessons so that wholly new possibilities and answers could emerge, often from his pupils. Putting himself in the position of "not knowing" was the secret of how he tackled design problems. It was what enabled him to pay close enough attention to the world to see things continually afresh. For me, and for all the students he ever taught, seeing things through his eyes



The Bauhaus to most people is a chrome chair or a lamp or modern typography. Well—and I'm talking about the experience I had—at the school the product was not a chair or lamp or typography. The product was the student, a human being who was supposed to have a sense that his importance was somehow linked to making the world better. Social responsibility was stressed over and over again.

—Nathan Lerner, 1982



Street Monster, 1976

was often to see them clearly for the very first time. In a way, he made learners (pun intended) of everyone he encountered.

At a lull in the conversation he stood up, walked over to a cabinet and pulled open a drawer. He returned with a large flat box, the kind photographic paper comes in. "I want to know what you think about these," he said, spreading the contents out on the table. Before me was an array of color enlargements, which at first seemed as abstract as any late-period Jackson Pollock painting. "What about this one?" he said.

"Isn't that a wall? Aren't those water stains, seeping out from between some bricks or concrete blocks in some wall somewhere?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so, speaking rather literally," he laughed. "But don't you also see a seated man's back—something like a classical Greek statue?" When he said that, I could suddenly see it too. "So now, what about that one?" he said, pointing to another. Slashes of red paint zig-zagged vertically across the field of view, but the thickened layers hadn't soaked in or dripped down the way they would have on a canvas. The effect was so painterly, though, that I had to remind myself that this was a photo, not a painting. I tried to concentrate on the source.

"Paint on a sidewalk?"

"On a street—but it's also a striding giant," he said. "Or maybe a kind of friendly monster. At least that's what I see." And as soon as he said it, there it was. Suddenly, in each of these images I began to see something else, something revealed only after first glances took in, then went beyond the obvious. Instead of chipped paint, rusting metal, or torn tar paper, I began to see birds, insects, witches, fish, sunsets. Each picture became a kind of riddle, its real subject matter floating below its immediate surface. Every image in the box was a strong abstract composition, but it also had a double meaning. Still, they were all straight photographic prints—none had been made with sandwich negatives, digital manipulations, or darkroom trickery. As I flipped through the stack I happily played the game of solving the riddles, trying to divine what each one was and where it came from, and each time I did so successfully, Nathan smiled.

At first these new images seemed like such a departure from Lerner's earlier photographic



work that I couldn't think of much to say about them beyond simply naming the hidden subjects. In the documentary photos he'd done back in the 1920s and '30s, when he'd wandered the streets shooting what would become his Maxwell Street series, the subject matter not only dominated but was always presented as directly as possible, right on the surface. The poor were the poor (i.e., the neighbors and friends he knew); trash was trash; piles of keys were piles of keys. Nothing was intentionally a metaphor for anything else. Although he later used these images as sources of abstract imagery for his paintings, the original images

Top: Key Maker, Maxwell Street and Sangamon Street, 1936
Bottom: Cakes in Window, 1937

Nathan Lerner's work embodies an auspicious convergence of two key aspects of creative light art: the abstract and the humanistic. His work radiates a rare sense of vitality. His lights and shadows can sing or cry, caress or strike with elementary sensuous power. Though his luminous images are not meant to tell stories or to give optical facsimiles of the empirical world, they never become ends in themselves. . . . They are always somehow infused with social insights, human sympathy, and suggest the wholeness of vision that we all seek.

—Gyorgy Kepes, 1976

had a plain and vital strength all their own. Even his picture of pastries in a window, while graphically strong in composition, was ultimately more about the longing for sweet plenty in the midst of the Great Depression than an exercise in pure abstraction.

Abstraction would come a few years later, after he'd enrolled in the first classes offered at the New Bauhaus and began making images that sought to escape the bounds of the physical world. For Nathan Lerner, however, abstraction was only another problem to solve. The eggs and strings and other objects he suspended in his Light Boxes were no longer merely eggs and strings, or even symbols of planets or streaking meteorites. They were something much more elemental: Euclidean spheres and ovoids, cylinders and pure lines, and all the darkness that surrounded the shapes themselves. Lerner then took it a step further; he was among the first to stand in front of a camera in a darkened room and sketch images in the air with a penlight during a time exposure. This technique allowed him to make images

with no initial subject matter at all—only light and the preserved remains of fluid movement—pure abstraction floating in the dark.

Although I could see a kind of trajectory in Lerner's creative development, the color images before me now, many of them only recently printed, puzzled me at first. It made sense that a socially concerned artist and street photographer could become a New Bauhaus-trained socially conscious designer, but these images seemed completely different, of some other order entirely. Like his early documentary photographs, they were what they were—walls were still essentially walls, rusting metal was still rusting metal—and like the Bauhaus work, they were also bold, experimental, abstract. But these images were something more. But what?

Suddenly it dawned on me that the question itself was flawed. I recalled a Nathan dictum I had once read in one of his essays from the mid-1940s: "The chief problem for the designer is always one of learning to recognize the problem itself," he wrote, "and then in learning

to ask the right questions. If one can do that, the answers almost always present themselves." In this case, the important question was not what these images were, but what they did. Nathan had found a way for each image to contain something else—something beyond its nominal subject matter—but he did it in such a way that the image could also remain true to its original, essential nature. Nathan's images were like wooden barrels. The wooden barrel, after all, while behaving like wood and being true to its material and manufacture, could contain anything one chose to put inside. The images were containers not only for hidden images, but more importantly for Nathan's ongoing acts of discovery. To solve the riddle, the viewer had to join Lerner in discovering the world. In that sense, the images were a convergence of everything Nathan Lerner had ever done.

When I left Nathan's studio a few hours later it was as if I could see for the first time in months. Traffic bustled on the street. Underneath the street lights that were just coming on, the cracks

of the sidewalk formed images of stars and planets and flights of birds. The sidewalk was still a place to walk—but it held the possibility of becoming a firmament. Up in the sky, bathed in the deep, rich hue it sometimes turns on perfect late summer evenings half an hour after sunset, a cloud became more than a cloud. It was a ship under full sail in an armada of mist.

Picasso once said he had spent his entire life learning to see like a child again—but Nathan Lerner brought about such a transformation in me in a single afternoon, at least for a little while. The feeling of being able to see everything twice, and as something more than it was, lasted for several days. Even now, if I try, I can call it up, just as I can call up Nathan's face that afternoon. Which is a good thing, because that was the last time I ever saw Nathan Lerner. Just a few months later, I learned that he was gone. We are left with the legacy of his art—the perfect container for his life of discovery.

Our new prepackaged culture is premeasured and sanitized, explicit and pasteurized so that all danger of infecting the imagination is killed. We live in a world remote from our sensibilities, where the product is hidden from view by glass, by boxes, and expressed not by itself, but by secondary images and words. Thus, an enormous barrier separates and shields us from vivid reality, making our sensibilities more and more muted from disuse. The real world of objects, facts, and feelings is filtered. Maxwell Street, failing fast, still remains as a reminder. It is the same, but the people have changed as our culture has changed. The unique sense of an individual, setting him apart as an individual, is gone.

—Nathan Lerner, c. 1980