

GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE

KARMA, NEW YORK, 2018.

The Sorceress in the Center of Everything

By Robert Cozzolino

She is a bruja, of course ... she only appears once in a hundred years,
but when she does even time stands still.¹

—James Purdy

There is a photograph of Gertrude Abercrombie that provides a window into who she was, *where* she was, and what she valued. It shows her embracing longtime friend Dizzy Gillespie as they pose before Abercrombie's *Self Portrait, the Striped Blouse*, 1940, one of her largest self-portraits. Gertrude and Dizzy hold one another with great affection and warmth, their bodies close and at ease. She relaxes into him, her head resting against his chest, and he smiles with his whole face, cheeks, eyes, ears, and mouth alight with happiness. It was Gillespie's birthday, and there were probably few people he would have rather spent it with than Abercrombie. He lived with many of her paintings and she hosted numerous after-hours performances by Gillespie at her home in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. Their love and mutual respect went deep and was built on a foundation that transcended aesthetics.

While Gillespie may have been one of Abercrombie's closest friends, he was part of a world that she related to early on, and to which she was devoted. Jazz and specifically bebop were Abercrombie's passions, music she viewed as an art form on par with, and likely superior to, anything achieved in the other arts.

Her Victorian home at 5728 South Dorchester Avenue on Chicago's South Side was a safe haven and a salon in the 1940s through the 1960s for (predominantly) African American musicians traveling through Chicago on tour. As was the case with Gillespie, she invited them back to her place after gigs, formed lasting friendships, and mixed national touring bands with local musicians at parties. Abercrombie thrived on this and did so at a time in which black musicians faced segregation, racism, and a hostile environment as they traveled around the U.S.

Abercrombie compiled an impressive list of those "adorable musicians" she fed, entertained, or who stayed at her home. Included are Jackie Cain, Miles Davis, Dorothy Donegan, Bud Freeman, Billie Holiday, Milt Jackson, Elvin Jones, Roy Kral, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Sonny Rollins, Hal Russell, Ed Shaughnessy, Art Tatum, and Sarah Vaughan.² Austrian émigré Ernst Krenek composed an opera (probably *Dark Waters*, 1950) while renting out the second floor of Abercrombie's home, and composer Ned Rorem often visited Abercrombie when he returned to Chicago. Pianist Richie Powell composed "Gertrude's Bounce" (1956) for her and recorded it with Roach, Rollins, Clifford Brown, and George Morrow before his tragic death

at twenty-four. James Purdy based a character in his novel *Malcolm* (1959) on Abercrombie. She inspired tributes across media.

Abercrombie was at the hub of several overlapping cultural circles and her Chicago was at the center of everything. Her intimates included musicians and composers, major figures in the literary and theater worlds, photographers and critics, and of course, other artists. Although well known in Chicago's art world and active in its many circles, Abercrombie maintained close relationships with a relatively small group of artists. She was friendly with Ivan Albright, Emil Armin, Macena Barton, Don Baum, Eldzier Cortor, Charles Sebree, Frances Strain, Julia Thecla, and others. Her most intense and sustained artist relationships were with Wisconsin-based friends Dudley Huppler, Karl Priebe, and John Wilde, with whom she corresponded nearly daily for decades.

Writer Wendell Wilcox described his friend as "compelling, unyielding, and, according to common standards, eccentric." As James Purdy suggested, she had an uncanny power, drew people to her and together, and was unlike anyone else in these circles. Wilcox stressed the importance of Abercrombie's closest friendships:

A great many came to admire and wonder at her, but out of all these, few came to be really loved. These few were loved with the truest warmth, and they gave her their warmth in return. There is in these closer friendships a feeling of something predestined, as if they had come from a long way back in time and will go on forever.

Wilcox's intimate perceptions bear out in the photograph of Abercrombie and Gillespie embracing. But let us be clear about what it meant for Abercrombie to project a public persona during the 1940s and 1950s in which she embraced black culture and provided its practitioners with a home. To unsympathetic outsiders it must have been dangerously political. Enjoying jazz might not have been a radical practice for white Americans in the 1940s and 1950s, but there are enough cues in Abercrombie's archives that allow us to know her viewpoint. In 1972 she reflected on the societal changes she had witnessed in her lifetime in a handwritten note. She stated,

The sight of a young black man walking down the street with his head held high & his feet and his body swinging—and after so many years of having been stepped on stomped on—he is saying 'Fuck you Whities—I'm ME—I AM ME. I am somebody. I am ME!' A more beautiful thing I never saw. I wonder if anybody else ever saw that. As clearly as I do. I doubt it.

Abercrombie no doubt heard infuriating and terrifying accounts from her musician friends about their experiences with racism as they traveled the country. In Chicago we can surmise that she also witnessed these things and was likely the target for ire, as she had no qualms about walking down the street with her African American friends and intermingling people of all backgrounds. She lived

the life she wanted, free of society's prejudices, surrounding herself with people on McCarthy-era America's margins. Two of her closest friends were openly gay—Huppler and Priebe—and reports from her circle show that a broad spectrum of sexual and gender fluidity was embraced in her community. It contributed to a worldview that also shaped her art and subject matter. She told an interviewer in 1972: "I try to make [my art] real. I often find my paintings more real than the world around me. And they are quieter. And I can put in that painted world just whom I choose."

Much can be glimpsed about Abercrombie's values and sense of humor by zooming in on a few close relationships. Milwaukee-based Priebe met Abercrombie in the mid-1930s when he lived in Chicago to study at the School of the Art Institute and volunteered at Jane Addams' Hull House and a South Side settlement house at 32nd and Wabash Avenue. This was a life-changing experience for him. He was drawn to African American nightclubs on Chicago's South Side, and eventually he befriended Pearl Bailey, Duke Ellington, Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Max Roach, and others. They corresponded with Priebe, and some stayed with him later in Milwaukee, forming connections to both him and Abercrombie. Priebe also met and corresponded with important figures associated with the Harlem Renaissance such as Richmond Barthé, Katherine Dunham, and Langston Hughes. Many of these new friends became patrons.

From 1945–55, Priebe was in a same-sex interracial relationship with Frank Roy Harriott, associate editor of *Ebony* magazine, who was also on the editorial staff of *PM*. Harriott, also a writer, received a Rosenwald fellowship to write a novel loosely based on the life of Billie Holiday. When Harriott was ill with a terminal disease, Priebe remained his primary caregiver, an act of devotion that was not lost on his friends. When Frank died Priebe wrote right away to Gertrude about his love's passing.⁷ Priebe understood the necessity of being careful, not letting his guard down, and protecting himself and Frank. In response to an invitation from Abercrombie to attend a party, Priebe wrote, "You made me so happy by writing. Here is the problem so answer. Frank H. is living with me and is colored and if we can come in the face of that we will. I mean—if Aidan's place will allow, then definitely we will be there. So find out and write and we'll appear. I would love to see you so report."

Huppler was a writer who became an artist, inspired by the work and lives of his painter friends. He came from the tiny town of Muscoda, Wisconsin, studied at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and then spent much of the late 1940s and 1950s traveling to Europe and New York. There he met many of his literary and artist heroes, including Katherine Anne Porter, Marianne Moore, George Platt Lynes, and others. "Oh did I ever get a welcome from Paul Cadmus & Jared French & a nice new painter called George Tooker, a cute name," he wrote after one of these excursions. "I might as well be in Europe, I'm that happy." Later he became part of Andy Warhol's intimate circle in the mid-1950s and exchanged drawings with him. Huppler was extraordinarily perceptive about his friends' work and regularly offered candid criticism about it in colorful letters. He sent Abercrombie elaborate lists of "painting ideas" and dirty stories, as much to amuse as to inspire her.

Huppler knew his audience and began many of his postcards—in plain view of postal authorities—with sexual puns, double entendres, and deliciously salacious tidbits

of their mutual friends' love lives. He and John Wilde addressed Abercrombie with feminized variants of renaissance and modernist artists' names. In-jokes abound in these letters. "Dear Long Joan (feminine for Long John; which are close to my favorite Evansville food)," Huppler wrote to her, making a poke at Wilde's anatomy. "Karl sez my dill pickles hit the spot with you—glad I could be represented by something so appropriate."¹¹ On a postcard reproducing his drawing of a fowl, titled *Young Cock*, Huppler teased, "Dear Gertrude—Yr. favorite subject matter. Ho ho."¹² In another he exclaimed, "Doing 3 long squashes now, any or all of which would be a pleasure to fondle, if not worse. Ho ho."¹³ On another postcard he pasted a newspaper clipping headlined, "3,750 Homos on Payroll?" detailing a McCarthy-era report to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, "part of its drive to rid the Government of homosexuals deemed bad security risks." Huppler's retort: "Dear Pabla, Isn't it awful—a democracy with royalty running it?"¹⁴ Elsewhere he played rivalries of friends off one another, congratulating Abercrombie on her recent New York solo exhibition at the Edwin Hewitt Gallery and then complaining, "Mad at you—don't think you love me at all. Not even a card from N.Y. Hope though it was big success & excitement. I'm leavin' for San Fran. Shortly, at last—for a visit to Sylvia Fein, my favorite artist. Yo ho, will that rile ya! No, I love all you girls about equal."

Abercrombie reserved her most direct art talk (and serious mutual respect) for Wilde, a third Wisconsin artist and close friend. It was likely through Wilde's recommendation that Abercrombie had her one and only show at Hewitt, where he had been exhibiting for a few years. Hewitt asked Lincoln Kirstein to do a studio visit to Abercrombie while he was visiting Chicago with the New York City Ballet Company. Kirstein wrote to her from the Blackstone Hotel and likely visited to see current work.¹⁶ Abercrombie visited New York to deliver work to Hewitt directly. "I just missed you in N.Y.," she reported to Wilde following the visit. "I showed [Hewitt] some little pictures and I guess he will show them next year. It makes me so happy. I feel good being in the same stables with you. We had such a wild time there. Saw some little dandies by you."

In the same letter Abercrombie expressed anxiety about the potential relationship, trusting Wilde's instinct. "I wanted to ask if everything was fine with you and Hewitt and do you think I will work out there OK. Does he ever sell much for you? Will you have a show there soon? Please answer these ?'s on a little card. Hewitt says he'll come here in August." By February 15, 1952, Hewitt set Abercrombie's solo exhibition for April 7–26th with a reception on the 24th in New York. This connection made Abercrombie's work associated with "Magic Realism" but Hewitt seemed to consider her output uneven and did not show it again. At the time he expressed concern in letters that she was making too much work, and in 1952–53 Abercrombie was preparing for a high concentration of solo exhibitions.

Nonetheless, Abercrombie shared ideas, asked for tips on method and technique and shared displeasure over art-world trends with Wilde. He responded to one of these letters from Gertrude by agreeing, "I too feel it is terrible that our pictures are not selling like hot-cakes & making us rich. No taste. Too much abstract—not enough love of the tale." Wilde inspired and encouraged Abercrombie to make more detailed and concentrated images. She found it exhilarating for a while but

eventually found it too demanding and perhaps incompatible with her natural manner of working. "Jonathan," she wrote. "Holy cow I got such a stiff neck from doing that careful realism. May have to change back. Doing a lady coming up through a marble top table. Semi-naked." Abercrombie in turn inspired many of Wilde's contemporary interiors and he included her in his pictures. Together they felt they were part of a little colony of artists (like their contemporaries Cadmus, French, and Tooker, who also showed at Hewitt) advancing personal subject matter with a clear and precise technique. They wanted contemporary art to have the symbolic meaning and dignity of earlier painting. "Yes, you are right," Wilde wrote to Abercrombie. "We must try to make everything so real. It is the only thing that counts. Even in doing those imaginative things they should be even realer, aina? But I don't think that right now is the time to publish a manifesto, do you? Screw manifestos. We'll just keep plugging with those nice little brushes, no?"

It should not be surprising that Abercrombie found aspects of Surrealism compatible with what she wished to express in her paintings. She wrote, "I am a pretty realistic person but don't like all I see. So I dream that it is changed. Then I change it to the way I want it. It is almost always pretty real. Only mystery and fantasy have been added. All foolishness has been taken out. It becomes my own dream." The exterior world was messy, volatile, unpredictable, full of heartache, and prone to emergency. Its juxtapositions were unreal and nightmarish. We do not have Abercrombie's reaction to the 1955 torture, murder, and mutilation of Emmett Till, but she and her community must have felt it deeply (she lived less than two miles from his home). Throughout her career she maintained a fine balance in her work between the mysterious and the factual, tragedy and humor. "I paint the way I do because I'm just plain scared," she said in a late interview. "I mean, I think it's a scream that we're alive at all, don't you?"

Abercrombie naturally found bebop's underlying philosophy of freedom, improvisation and odd juxtapositions of tone and timbre analogous to Surrealism. It is the underlying pulse beneath these serial compositions and links Abercrombie's practice with jazz. Gillespie recognized this and remarked, "Gertrude Abercrombie ... has taken the essence of our music and transported it into another form." They shared the feeling that "Art is just an extension of the artist ... you have to seek the truth in yourself and not what anyone else says about it and you just keep going and time will take care of it." Abercrombie explained how she viewed her relationship to bebop in a conversation with Gillespie that suggests how much she internalized improvisation and the striving for feeling. "What you do is you look and look and look, with artists, and that's what I did," she said. "Then I just decided to do it my way, my own direction, it's a little offbeat, a little dreamy, and mysterious, yes, mysterious, just like the music; nobody knows what's happening, I know what's happening."

This is the context in which Abercrombie imagined, and then depicted in a straightforward visual language, an alternate, improved reality, often projecting calm, order, and quiet. But this, like everything that appears in Abercrombie's paintings, was not entirely as it seemed. At times that silence barely holds back a writhing anxiety behind the doors and windows punctuating cell-like rooms. She often appears poised between two meaningful objects, including portals, unadorned buildings in a nocturnal landscape, owls and cats, open windows and paintings that

echo the room in which they reside. She embodies the tension between possible paths, and, when pushed, splits into two—mirror images or self and shadow, a world multiplying with alternate selves and doppelgangers. In life, Abercrombie had to constantly shift gears socially to perform multiple aspects of her self as a strategy of survival and alliance. Surrealism must have felt right because it was a representational tool of shapeshifting and hybridity.

The paintings cumulatively reveal a shifting sequence of stages in a psychological theater featuring Abercrombie as their lead character. Was it her way of catharsis—to expose her feelings about her domestic and artistic life, relationships, and events? Like other Chicagoans of her generation, she underwent psychoanalysis with Dr. Franz Alexander of the city's Institute for Psychoanalysis. Alexander explored the relationship between mind and body in his work, something that resonated with Abercrombie's approach to painting. He also pioneered a treatment aimed at healing traumatic emotional experiences of the past, which Abercrombie referenced obliquely in her imagery. One wonders among all of the shadows, specters, doubles, and ghosts—what is returning from the past or the grave? What is fragmenting from Abercrombie's personality and becoming its own entity and why? What is resurfacing? What do they want or need? Are they harbingers, or memory come to haunt in bodily form?

In addition to her body, objects possessed symbolic significance for Abercrombie. She painted a set of prized items in different combinations as though deploying coded messages or spells. *My Second Best Box* (page 413) includes a painted key, rubber ball, wishbone, shell, and a jack that hover near the actual objects like chimeras caught in a shadow box. She saw magical undercurrents in the juxtaposition of real things with their painted simulacra. She explained this aspect of her work as clairvoyant, and once told a writer,

The strange thing is, once I paint something, it usually turns up in real life. For example, that marble-topped counter there. It popped up in a painting I did. Then, a few weeks later I saw it in a shoemaker's shop. Naturally, he had to sell it to me. After all, I had painted it!

Abercrombie loved the supernatural, and references to the occult populate much of her work. In *Where or When (Things Past)*, Abercrombie commands the interior like a dancer pausing between movements, her left arm raised to hold aloft a length of ribbon that falls diagonally behind her back into her right hand and then wraps around a cat's neck like a leash. On the floor at the right sits a cone-shaped object that resembles a spirit trumpet (a device used by mediums to hear the voices of spirits). Here the spirit trumpet may be channeling voices from the past, transmitting them to the artist and her pet. Abercrombie often appears in her work as though in a trance, caught between two worlds—conscious in a realm of the unseen while physically inhabiting the terrestrial.

Abercrombie's archives and interviews include numerous firsthand tales of the paranormal. Once she was in Galena, Illinois, with a friend, Norman MacLeish, artist and brother of poet Archibald MacLeish. As they drove by a graveyard they "saw mists

over graves and decided to investigate.” Abercrombie recalled that they stopped and entered the cemetery. “Suddenly saw big red ball bouncing towards us. First we thought it was a man with a lantern—but it just wasn’t. At last we got so frightened we ran like crazy ... I think it was a will-o-the-wisp. Or swamp fire. Maybe. Next night it was not there.” In response to an interviewer pressing her about whether her home was haunted, she responded,

Sure ... there are plenty of poltergeists here. Sometimes they play the piano or the bass. I thought at first it was just hallucinations. But the kid who stays here on and off heard them too. I gave him hell one morning for playing the bass the previous night and keeping me awake. He told me he thought I was playing. Then we remembered that Israel Crosby had just died. I guess Israel just decided to give us a little concert.

This immersion in the otherworldly and embrace of the marginal may have felt out of place and unusual in another city. But in Abercrombie’s cultural community these proclivities fell in line with what made Chicago a vibrant place to be an artist. Independence was important to her, signaling freedom, and that characterized the Chicago art world for her generation and those that followed. This determination to follow a personal vision and idiosyncratic subject matter or method was often misconstrued as a willful isolation from the broader art world when scrutinized from New York. But Chicagonans were clear on their awareness of the many directions in the international art world; they simply chose to do their own thing after considering the options. The last thing you wanted to be called in Chicago was derivative, showing the clear influence of another artist on your work.

Abercrombie worked in an art world that was uncharacteristically open to women. In Chicago there had been and persisted a culture in which women held important roles at art institutions, led the way as tastemakers and curators, and had professional influence as artists. Chicago’s artists worked to make their city a progressive, democratic community in which new ideas could thrive in public. Modernism in Chicago was less bound to style and more a measure of individuality, attitude, and risk-taking. In sharp contrast to the climate in other major American cities, Chicago was a place in which women artists were taken seriously and rivaled the successes of their male counterparts. In 1937 *Chicago Daily News* critic C.J. Bulliet asserted that, “Chicago’s competent woman painters outnumber its men of like caliber.” It was not the first time, nor the last that Bulliet would espouse this view in print. Critics often singled out women as exemplary figures on the scene, without always referencing their gender as exceptional.

The seeds of what would become the feminist movement, and even many of the internal debates that emerged within it in the early 1970s, germinated in Chicago in 1893, with the role of Bertha Honoré Palmer in the organization and patronage of the Women’s Building at the World’s Columbian Exposition. That this had happened in Chicago was not lost on subsequent artists. “We had the legacy of Mrs. Potter Palmer ... as a role model,” artist Ellen Lanyon has noted. That the 1893 building was a touchstone for the feminist movement was made clear when the 1973 Los

Angeles Women's Building used the 1893 frontispiece of the *Art and Handicraft in the Women's Building* handbook for a poster split in half to include the contemporary L.A. structure.

In the early decades of the twentieth century Chicago saw a rise in powerful collectors, many of whom were women, who helped strengthen the city's institutions and art scene. Women also helped establish important venues for creative ferment in the city. Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry* magazine in 1912; in 1918 Rue Winterbotham Carpenter and Alice Roullier took over the fledgling Arts Club (founded 1916) and led it to become for many decades the most active and challenging institutional voice for modernism in the city. Later, Katharine Kuh opened her influential avant-garde gallery (1935–1943), showing international artists alongside Chicagoans (including women) before becoming the first curator of modern art at the Art Institute of Chicago. Frances Strain, who exhibited with early Chicago radical groups, went on to become the director of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (1941–62), which under her leadership became a critical venue for contemporary art in the city. In a 1932 book on artists in Chicago she expressed what would become a refrain for Chicago's artists across generations. "I believe in going to one's own world for ideas to express," she wrote. "I prefer [to paint] that which gives me a sense of intimate and personal contact. I try to concern myself more with what the subject means to me than with its appearance.... Each must adapt nature in accordance with his own ideas."

Helen Gardner taught the first art history course offered at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and through the curriculum she developed her book *Art through the Ages: An Introduction to Its History and Significance* (1926). Gardner's innovative approach integrated art into its historical context while also addressing the aesthetic issues of individual objects. In her second edition (1936) she expanded on arts from the non-Western world, including expanded sections on Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Native American traditions. Gardner's student and friend Kathleen Blackshear eventually took over her classes and transformed the SAIC art history curriculum into one that stressed anthropology, natural history, and science as viable visual materials for study by art historians and artists. Blackshear encouraged her students to branch out from fine-art sources in order to look closely at a wide range of natural inspiration and objects made by a broad range of human civilizations. Building on Gardner's concepts, she urged her students to visit Chicago's Adler Planetarium, Field Museum of Natural History, Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, Shedd Aquarium, and its zoos to study form, pattern, and to draw. Her students consistently recalled her openness and strong encouragement that artists seek out material and develop a personally meaningful visual language.

From the early 1930s, Chicago was a nurturing climate for Surrealism, and the city is well known for its great collections—private and public—of Surrealist art. Progressive educators, daring curators, and supportive institutions provided a cultural infrastructure that welcomed Surrealist art from the time of the first exhibitions of the movement on American soil. In 1931 the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, mounted *Newer Super Realism*, the first museum exhibition to introduce Americans to a large number of works by the European Surrealists. The Arts Club of Chicago exposed Chicagoans to Surrealism even earlier than the Atheneum's

exhibition introduced it on the East Coast, with an exhibition of Man Ray's Rayographs in 1929; a second show focused on the work of Francis Picabia (1929); and a third, on the art of Giorgio de Chirico (1930). Over the next decade and a half, the Arts Club presented no fewer than eighteen solo exhibitions by the Surrealists and their associates.

Thus able to experience Surrealist work of great variety firsthand, Chicago artists—including Abercrombie—adopted, transformed, rejected, and learned from what they saw. By 1932 the city claimed an art culture that emphasized and valued individuality, understanding modernism as a set of ideas and possibilities rather than styles. Chicago artists were suspicious of theories and dogma, of trends and the canon. As Abercrombie's contemporary, artist Belle Baranceanu declared, "Limiting oneself with theories is fatal." Painter Macena Barton, assertively feminist in lifestyle and art, declared,

[I paint] exactly what I feel and am not influenced by the methods of other artists, even those whom I admire most. I paint to please myself, to satisfy an inner urge that must find expression. One must live life in order to interpret it. To put this interpretation upon canvas should be the chief aim of the painter.

This generation's emphasis on individuality, uninhibited self-expression, and belief that art must have a living connection to its audience and maker, reverberated among younger Chicago artists. Their focus on the body, the vibrantly depicted environment, and use of personal experience for subject matter also established modes of working that remained strong over many decades. Abercrombie was central to shaping this aspect of the city's artistic identity.

Chicago's geography, urban planning, and distinctive neighborhoods may also have predisposed its population to be comfortable with Surrealism. The city's popular-culture identity, at least as projected to and embraced by outsiders, courted the illogical and thrived on unexpected juxtapositions. A metropolis that had burned to ash in 1871 showed the world it was capable of rejuvenation in the form of an ostentatious "White City" in 1893—a neoclassical fantasy land that was at odds with how its most advanced architects proceeded to build modern skyscrapers and streamlined homes. Whether known for Al Capone or the Black Sox baseball scandal of 1919, the city came to understand paradox and hyperbole as symptoms of the absurd in daily life.

Jarring contrasts were natural to Abercrombie's visual language. This tendency may have been due to how Chicago seemed designed to emphasize incongruity: Sleek modernist architecture rose only a few miles from its grotesque stockyards. Filthy, industrial air hung over the protected natural spaces of the Lake Michigan shoreline. Downtown Chicago was framed on its south edge by the city's best-known African American neighborhood, Bronzeville, and on its north by its most affluent white area, the Gold Coast. For Art Green, a member of the Hairy Who in the late 1960s, the extreme contrasts and abrupt shifts in tone of Chicago made Surrealism natural. He noted:

And so when I saw surrealist works that utilized collage, or

incongruous juxtapositions, it seemed like the world that I was in ... and things and ideas. [The] ... first time I came to Chicago was on the train ... through Gary and Whiting and Hammond at night with the flames belching out, it's like you were going through the gates of Hades.

Surrealism provided flexible stylistic approaches to subjects for a wide range of Chicago artists. But Abercrombie and others did not simply copy them; rather they selected approaches that they then made their own. In a city where the art scene thrived on the full expression of individuality, no matter how raw or challenging, Surrealism offered ways to expose oneself and probe deeply into the nature of things. While its reception in the city contributed to the development of world-class collections of the material, Surrealism also gave local artists something to push against and helped artists to define themselves.

When Abercrombie had her 1977 retrospective at the Hyde Park Art Center just a few months before her death, it was a chance for a new generation of Chicago artists, critics, collectors, and visitors to see her work in a fresh context. The late 1960s Chicago art scene had been revitalized by the cumulative effect of artists making their own exhibition opportunities and gravitating towards alternative spaces and centers that shifted attention away from large institutions. Abercrombie herself had voiced support for and exhibited with Exhibition Momentum, a radical group formed largely by students (including Leon Golub and Ellen Lanyon). The Hyde Park Art Center itself, with Abercrombie's friend artist and curator Don Baum directing programs, had stimulated the scene by being the site of artist-directed shows such as *Hairy Who* in the late 1960s. In this moment, Abercrombie's work looked very much like it had been a precursor and formative part of what the world considered a Chicago aesthetic or philosophy by the mid-1970s.

Dennis Adrian, who was a passionate and intelligent chronicler of this scene, reflected on Abercrombie after viewing the retrospective. He wrote that "the attitude and example of her life and work, taken together ... anticipated the character and quality of much of Chicago art life now." He noted that her "vocation as a painter involved an intimate association with a broader cultural context," specifically music, literature, photography, and theater. Her work, he concluded, shared with these other forms a concern with human feeling. "She herself provided inspiration for many of their practitioners," Adrian noted. "Abercrombie as a result never crabbed about the lack or provincialism of a genuine Chicago culture—she knew early that it existed, that it was exciting, open, and accessible."⁴⁵ She was the sorceress in the middle of everything—her own cultural center.

Following her death, and that successful retrospective, one of those younger artists painted a gorgeous, spot-on homage to Queen Gertrude. Roger Brown's *Death of Gertrude Abercrombie* (1977) places us at a distance from her home in Hyde Park, across the street along with two other mourners. Curtains pulled back from her windows, we see inside her home which exudes a warm glow. Gertrude's famous cats arch their backs on the bottom floor, perhaps aware of the passing spirit of their keeper. On the second floor Abercrombie lies in bed wearing one of her ubiquitous fancy hats. In Brown's handling it resembles a halo, and Abercrombie a

saint. To the right we see an attendant, likely Don Baum, witnessing her transition to the afterlife. Above, the sky erupts in floral fireworks, and jazz musicians fill the night air with music, played in adjacent buildings. Brown painted this lamentation in Giotto blues, giving Chicago's art history a reverent but cool icon for an artist who led the way in more areas than anyone realized in 1977.

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