

# CHICAGO READER

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Gertrude Abercrombie's self-portraits show an inner landscape of anxiety, fear, and loneliness

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Gertrude Abercrombie, *My Second Best Box*, 1975

Gertrude Abercrombie (1909-1977) thought herself ugly yet couldn't stop painting self-portraits. Not many of the forty-some pictures in "Portrait of the Artist as a Landscape," now at the Elmhurst Art Museum, attempt to render Abercrombie's actual features, but almost all of them try to depict her mental or emotional states. They are indeed overwhelmingly landscapes, as the title of the exhibition states, but of anxiety, fear, and loneliness rather than of sea, sky, or earth.

Abercrombie lived most of her life in Hyde Park and traveled in highly-cultured circles. She palled around with jazz luminaries like Sonny Rollins and Dizzy Gillespie and was called "the queen of bohemian artists" according to Donna Seaman's *Identity Unknown: Rediscovering Seven American Women Artists* (which is as close as Abercrombie's come to getting a full biography). Yet for all the liveliness implied in the wall-texts and photographs included in the exhibition, the overwhelming impression of her pictures is of forlorn, eternal solitude, and sadness. Whatever light is allowed to shine in an Abercrombie painting comes from the moon rather than the sun. And a faint, far off moon at that.

The visual alphabet Abercrombie uses is made up of looming clouds, leafless trees, wandering maidens, oversized owls, and, most compellingly, groups of freestanding doors. Painted red, turquoise, grey, and white, they reappear in several paintings on show (and in dozens over the course of her career). They serve as a barrier and defense against the outside world and reveal more effectively than any of Abercrombie's other recurring imagery a key aspect of her personality: that, despite the life-of-the-party image she projected to the outside world, much of what was inside her was off limits to others.

If these desolate pictures are indeed an accurate portrayal of what was inside her, perhaps the ugliness she was so convinced of in herself went more than skin deep. The best of her paintings carry some of the mystery of the work of the metaphysical painter Giorgio De Chirico, but on a more intimate scale, and with a nervous fragility all her own. In fact, the heavy wooden frames in which many of these diminutive pictures are encased often overwhelm them visually. Unlike the booming,

propulsive beat of her bebop buddies, Abercrombie's song is a delicate, gentle one, which requires quiet and an absence of distraction to appreciate properly. She may have been queen of bohemia to others, but ruled over a far lonelier realm in her inner life.

Looking for more insight into this intriguing exhibition, I reached out to the Elmhurst Art Museum's exhibition manager, Lal Bahcecioglu, with some questions and she kindly responded via email.

**How did you get involved with this exhibition? Did you know much about Gertrude Abercrombie beforehand?**

The initial idea for this exhibition was formed by Jenny Gibbs, the former executive director of the Elmhurst Art Museum. She has been working on this project for quite a while. Part of the exhibition was a conversation with our partners the Illinois State Museum, who worked with us on our "Kings & Queens: Pinball, Imagists, and Chicago" exhibit. I was not familiar with Abercrombie's work until I started working on this exhibition. Now I'm fascinated with her life story, and it is exciting to be a part of an institution that is bringing light an under-recognized Chicago artist.

**The paintings seem to be from a very different time than today, or perhaps they're just otherworldly. Did you have any difficulty connecting with this work?**

It is interesting because few artists were painting like her in Chicago at the time. Her work was always otherworldly and unconventional, while also self-referential. At first, I was a bit skeptical and afraid of the enigmatic quality of her work. However, she almost never explained the "meaning" of her paintings and any possible symbolism. I believe this makes her work very personal, while also leaving room for audiences. An open interpretation of her work allows the viewer to easily make a personal connection with it. Every interpretation is valid.

**I was most drawn to Abercrombie's door motif. Since you're incorporated actual doors in the installation of the show, you must've felt the same. Do you have an idea why she returned to them so often?**

Gertrude Abercrombie used doors quite often. In her early works, she used closed or locked doors—which creates both secure and yet trapped environments that are inaccessible. During 1950's, Hyde Park—where Abercrombie was residing—was a site of urban renewal. Those demolition sites in Hyde Park often had randomly aligned salvaged doors. And this became a significant influence on her artistic vocabulary. All of the doors in her paintings are nonfunctional: they are lined up like a wall in an open space, hinged to the wall so flat as if they are not even real doors, and in a few cases appear in a surreal landscape. The dual interpretation of a door as a barrier, while also a possible entry point to a new unknown space is my own interpretation of her door motif. In this exhibition, we used real salvaged doors as design elements inspired by her paintings. It drew from her playfulness, but also some clever works where she painted small versions of her own paintings with one of her interiors.

**I found it surprising that Abercrombie was so hooked into the jazz scene in Chicago as the mood in her work seems more like chamber music. Do you see any jazz in it?**

The famous jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie described Abercrombie as the first Bop artist. In his words: "Bop in the sense that she has taken the essence of our music and transported it to another art form." Some people have interpreted that a number of ways. Others have only used other art historical comparisons. In some ways it is clear she was making unconventional paintings within a conventional framework of interiors, still lives, and landscape.

**What has audience response been like so far? Is there a particular type of visitor who responds best to this work?**

Our visitors so far love the show! The exhibition has three parts. The first part is more didactic that gives insights into Abercrombie's life including a WFMT radio interview with her and Studs Terkel, which ran shortly after her death in 1977. This section also has works inspired by Abercrombie that were made by other artists. The second part can be seen as a small-scale retrospective, which

includes her work ranging from the late 30s until early 70s. The final part of the show, *You're Surreal*, is an immersive installation by the artist and educator Donna Castellanos. In this room, all visitors are invited to interact with props and make their creations. The show has been very well received by young and old alike.