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SPOOKY VISIONS: LATEST TMA EXHIBIT EXPLORES AMERICA'S FASCINATION WITH THE PARANORMAL

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Gertrude Abercrombie, an American painter who lived and worked in Chicago in the mid-20th century, described seeing mysterious happenings in cemeteries, being surrounded by spiritual entities in her South Side home, and often spoke of a deceased jazz musician friend who would perform personal concerts for her in the middle of the night.

Her paintings, two of which are shown in the exhibition *Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art* that opened Saturday at the Toledo Museum of Art, often reflected what she saw from beyond.

“When you look at Gertrude Abercrombie’s paintings ... she plays a central role, she always depicts herself. And what’s depicted around her, it seems like it’s surrealism, it seems like it’s based on dream imagery or trying to imagine the impossible. But for Gertrude, it was her version of realism,” said Robert Cozzolino, the Patrick and Aimee Butler Curator of Painters at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the organizer of the traveling show.

“The majority of work in the show is by artists who claimed to have these experiences or for whom this was an integral part of their world view and beliefs system. So the show looks at how does that manifest in objects, and what is the role of art in all of this?”

Abercrombie's pieces are part of a show by Cozzolino that was more than five years in the making, and explores America's fascination with the supernatural through artistry in the past 200 years. The exhibition features more than 150 pieces, including paintings, sculpture, drawings, sketchbooks and journals, prints, photographs, furniture, clothing and textiles, video animation pieces, and scientific instruments and other occult paraphernalia.

While not intentional, the curator sees an important connection to what has happened in the world in the last year and a half.

"Our relationship to loss and mourning is so at the surface right now because of COVID and because of the way we experienced the last year-plus. I also connect it to all the necessary coming to light, and people waking up to social justice reckonings ... in this country that are front and center right now," he said. "While all of that's real and tangible, I think one of the things people will talk about often is how if we don't deal with the impact unjust events had in the past, they are going to continue to resurface and so some artists show that as a haunting or as ghosts, and talk about being haunted by the past."

The exhibition is divided into four sections and because of scheduling shifts during the coronavirus pandemic, is first being shown in the Glass City.

The opening portion of the show takes a look at how our country is haunted by the ghosts of those who have lived here before us, said Lauren Applebaum, TMA's former associate curator of American art, who took a new post in May as curator of American art at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, but curated the Supernatural show for Toledo.

Right away, visitors to the exhibition get a dose of this exploration in the piece "Destinies Manifest," a video animation by John Jota Leanos that was commissioned by the Denver Art Museum.

In the piece, Leanos responds to the 19th century painting by John Gast called "American Progress" to show a woman draped in white robes flowing through the air as she leads settlers into North America.

"He takes the notion of manifest destiny portrayed in this painting and he kind of flips it to tell the story from the perspective of indigenous peoples and the violence of colonialism that was depicted upon them by settlers moving westward and kicking them off their land," Applebaum said. "It turns into this utopian presence in which nature has essentially been destroyed.

The work really asks viewers living in the present to grapple with the violence of our past and address the ghosts of those living before us."

An oil on canvas piece by 19th century artist John Quidor, "The Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane" (1858), can also be seen in this part of

the show, and is an example of some of the pieces not based on personal experience, Cozzolino said.

“It’s not a real event, it’s not something Quidor saw, but it’s from an influential piece of American literature that is, in part, it’s a ghost story,” he said.

Abercrombie’s piece “Strange Shadows” (1950) joins other artwork like Morris Kantor’s “Haunted House” (1930), and Macena Barton’s “Untitled (Portrait of Mother)” — expressive artwork that speaks to spiritual contact.

“It’s that perpetual wondering that human beings have about ‘what is the meaning of our place in the world, and are there things we can’t see that are part of what makes it all tick, and are we alone in the universe?’ That’s another fundamental question I think a lot of these artists are interested in,” Cozzolino said.

“The Rootworker’s Table” (2011) is a 3-dimensional piece made up of a chalkboard of recipes and cures over an antique chest of drawers holding bottles someone might see in an apothecary, Applebaum said.

“The artist is paying homage to healers ... and potion brewers and different African diasporic communities, people who would use herb and other natural substances to protect their community members from negative energy,” she said.

This is also the part of the exhibition where visitors can learn more about artists who first identified as mediums, often in spiritualist churches like Camp Chesterfield, where medium Frances Hanes McVey claimed the spirit of artist William Blake guided her hand to create her 1957 piece “Macrocosm,” Cozzolino said.

“Plural Universes” takes us to the very places it implies: Locations that lie beyond Earth in pieces like that of Macena Barton in “Untitled (Flying Saucers with Snakes, 1960).”

Often this is equated with films, podcasts and television shows that over the years have been thrilling forms of entertainment for individuals, Cozzolino said.

“A lot of time the entry point to the supernatural is that someone opens the door or goes through a wall, and there’s a whole different realm there, or something is triggered by words you say or a ritual, something like that,” he said. “There are a lot of reasons why people find that entertaining, but at heart it’s this question of ‘Is what we see in this world all that there is?’”