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A MIDCENTURY 'JAZZ WITCH' ARTIST FINDS A FANDOM IN THE FUTURE

by Neda Ulaby



Gertrude Abercrombie's 1950 oil painting *Strange Shadows (Shadows and Substance)*. Digital capture of page 311 from the artist monograph. Publisher: Karma Books, New York. Publication © 2018 Karma Books, New York. Artwork © the artist. All rights reserved.

Charles Walbridge/Minneapolis Institute of Art

A bohemian self-styled witch who hobnobbed with the leading jazz luminaries of her era was also an accomplished painter. Gertrude Abercrombie lived in a ramshackle frame house on Chicago's South Side, sweeping around in pointy black hats and capes. Now, nearly 50 years after her death in 1977, Gertrude Abercrombie is enchanting a new generation of art lovers.

"She was a character for days," says Robert Cozzolino, curator of the touring art show *Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art*. "I'm surprised somebody hasn't made a biopic about her."

She was called Queen Gertrude by the people who knew her best. "I think a lot of magic happened around her," Cozzolino says.

Cozzolino, a curator of paintings at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, included two of Abercrombie's paintings in *Supernatural America*. The show, currently on view at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky., centers on art that reflects the national imagination through the lens of the paranormal. The 160 works of art in the show explore how America is haunted by a violent colonial history that includes slavery and genocide. They look at traditions of

contacting spirits during times of mass death, at new rituals and Ufology – the examination of unidentified flying objects.

Abercrombie's eerily desolate landscapes often include cats, moons, playing cards featuring queens, self-portraits and towers.

"Sometimes she's in the tower like she's imprisoned ... or maybe she's decided to stay away from everybody," Cozzolino says.

The daughter of itinerant opera singers, Abercrombie studied art in Chicago. During the Great Depression, she signed up with the WPA's Federal Art Project.

"Each month we all got — if we were first-class citizens, we all got \$94 a month, which was marvelous in 1935," Abercrombie told Studs Terkel on his WFMT radio show in 1977, shortly before her death. "That gave me a big start and a boost. God bless Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We all worked hard. We really worked from morning till when, well, whenever we got up. ... It just saved some of our lives and it started me on my career."

It was though her short-lived marriage to a music critic that Abercrombie became close with jazz musicians such as Sonny Rollins, Sarah Vaughn, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, who became one of her best friends. During the Jim Crow era, when Black musicians were not allowed to stay at many hotels, she offered refuge. "Her house was one of the places that Black musicians knew to go as a safe house, and they would often perform or stay with her beyond their gigs," Cozzolino says.

"The Modern Jazz squad used to live here off and on for two years," Abercrombie reminisced to Terkel about the iconic The Modern Jazz Quartet, which had sprouted from Dizzy Gillespie's rhythm section in the early 1950s. "They'd play here in town every two weeks, every month or two or three and they lived here. They were funny fellows and awfully sweet."

Tall, sardonic and irrepressible, Abercrombie was immortalized by other artists; James Purdy wrote Gertrude of Stony Island about her, and jazz pianist Richie Powell composed a song about the way Abercrombie walked, titled "Gertrude's Bounce." A note in the original sheet music reads: "Walks just like the way the rhythm sounds in the introduction. Theme as a gay spritely quality in terms of the minor moves that proceeded on the side." Dizzy Gillespie compared her paintings to jazz.

For much of her adult life, Abercrombie was little known outside her circle of Chicago artists and jazz musicians. She died at age 68, after years of declining health due to alcoholism and arthritis. But after the East Village gallery Karma mounted a retrospective in 2018, Gertrude Abercrombie became, posthumously, an art world star.

“It was her first exhibition in New York since the 1950s,” Robert Cozzolino says. “People lost their minds. [Co-chief New York Times art critic] Roberta Smith wrote a long review, singing her praises. They published this thick book and it sold out immediately. And you know, I think when Gertrude Abercrombies come to auction now, they’re insane.”

Meaning that, thanks to Abercrombie’s newfound fashionability, paintings that might’ve cost a few thousand dollars a few years ago now sell for hundreds of thousands.

“So, I mean, that’s one measure of success,” he says. “But you know, people are very interested in her now, in part because the works really speak to people. They’re mysterious without being overbearing or kind of cryptic. And her story, and what kinds of things she did in her life, are so fascinating and colorful.”

“I think everything is mysterious,” Abercrombie said to Studs Terkel in that long-ago interview in 1977, shortly before she died. “As I’ve told other people, the whole world is a mystery.”