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MEET SURREALIST GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE, THE ‘JAZZ WITCH’ WHO CAPTIVATED THE ART WORLD.

by Katie White

Getrude Abercrombie, Where or When (Things Past) (1948).
Collection of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.
Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust.

“The Whole World Is a Mystery” at the Carnegie Museum of Art marks the first retrospective look at the artist in more than 30 years.

The whole world is a mystery,” the painter Gertrude Abercrombie said in a 1977 interview, just months before her death at the age of 68. The remark tied around a lifetime of Abercrombie’s work like a neat ribbon. From the 1930s until her death in 1977, the bohemian Chicago artist had painted pithy, surrealist scenes filled with solitary women, cats, luminous moons, fairytale towers, and halls lined with colorful doors. A spirit of magic, of lucid dreaming, characterized her work, and her vibrant personal world.

She was known as the “Queen of Chicago” by some, and the “jazz witch” by others. Born the daughter of itinerant opera singers, she took root in Chicago. Living in a four-story Victorian brownstone of fading elegance in the city’s eclectic Hyde Park neighborhood, Abercrombie (1909–1977) established herself as a salonnière in the tradition of Gertrude Stein (the other Gertrude was a huge influence on her, too), hosting the city’s energetic jazz scene with musician from Charlie Parker to Dizzy Gillespie staying, and sometimes playing at her home. A tall woman, who’d been made to feel plain by her mother, Abercrombie often dressed elaborately, with leopard print coats, capes, and even pointy witch hats accessorizing her wardrobe.

But Abercrombie’s life was also marred by inner turmoil, including loneliness and struggles with alcoholism. Her paintings, with their symbols, hint at the rich inner world of her dreams and personal meanings. “Surrealism is meant for me because I am a pretty realistic person but I don’t like all I see. So I dream that it is changed,” she once said of her work. “Then I change it to the way I want it. It is always almost pretty real. Only mystery and fantasy have been added. All foolishness has been taken out. It becomes my own dream.”
When Abercrombie passed away, she was adored by many in her tight-knit Chicago scene, but almost wholly unknown in the wider art world. Her art, and story, seemed destined for regional lore, alone. But that’s not how things turned out, after all.

Today, nearly 50 years after Abercombie's death, Chicago's bohemian queen is garnering widescale recognition. This January, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh opened "Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World Is a Mystery," the most comprehensive museum presentation of the artist's work to date (on view until June 5). The exhibition, which is co-organized with the Colby College Museum of Art, in Maine (the show will travel to the Colby this summer), brings together loans from important institutional and private collections and offers a window into Abercrombie's enigmatic and highly personal world. It is the first institutional retrospective of her work since 1991 and the first to travel nationally (the exhibition will also head to the Milwaukee Art Museum).

"Abercrombie was a critical figure in the mid-20th-century Chicago art and jazz scenes who produced hundreds of paintings imbued with autobiography that revealed her emotional truth and blended levels of reality," said Sarah Humphreville, curator of American Art at Colby College Museum of Art, who co-curated the show. "Her work is simultaneously extremely personal and—thanks to her use of an approachable visual language grounded in representation and invested with humor—extremely accessible."

"The Whole World Is a Mystery" brings to culmination years of growing fascination with the American surrealist. Abercrombie's legacy was first brought to new eyes beyond the Chicago area in 2018 when New York's Karma Gallery staged a major exhibition of her works co-curated by Dan Nadel and published a lavishly illustrated book edited by Nadel with essays by Robert Storr, among others. The show marked the first showing of Abercrombie's works in New York since 1952 and garnered rave reviews including by Roberta Smith in the New York Times.

Brendan Dugan, the founder of Karma, first came across her work while organizing a group exhibition of American landscape painters in 2016. "I discovered Gertrude's work through that lens. I just immediately fell in love with the work." He's quick to note that while the work was new to him, scholars and curators in the Chicago area had long known her work. "I certainly wasn't the first to discover her," he added. Among these familiar with her was the scholar Susan Weininger, who wrote an essay for the catalogue, and noted that "Her rich and sometimes inconsistent inner consciousness is reflected in the world she created in her paintings"

In 2022, two of Abercrombie's paintings were included in "Supernatural America" at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, curated by Robert Cozzolino, an exhibition that considered the role of the paranormal in shaping American imagery that garnered sizable attention.

Prices for Abercrombie's paintings have ascended in tandem with this renewed interest. In November of last year, her 1953 painting Silo at Aledo sold at Bonhams New York for a record-setting $864,100, nearly five times the pre-sale high estimate of $150,000. This was not a one-off occurrence. According to the Artnet Price Database, her work boasts a 98 percent sell-through rate. Over the past five years, paintings estimated in the tens of thousands have routinely sold for hundreds of thousands.

While many museums and galleries have, over the past decade, focused on the rediscoveries of women artists who were forgotten over the decades or overlooked in their own times, the story of Gertrude Abercrombie has particularly captivated art lovers and the momentum around her continues to grow.

"The capacity for people's interest in her work has just continued to expand whether it's collectors or curators or artists or the market," said Dugan "People keep being more and more excited about it." Coinciding with this major retrospective, we took a closer look at Gertrude Abercrombie's life and legacy.

A Daughter of the Midwest

While Abercrombie's childhood was peripatetic, the landscapes of Illinois would shape her visual world. The artist was born in 1909, in Austin, Texas, but her parents' careers as opera singers would soon bring the family back to the Chicago area, and then to Berlin, Germany.

For a time, the family lived in her father's hometown of Aledo, Illinois, a landscape that would cement itself in Abercrombie's imagination, and where she would spend many happy childhood summers (Aledo is a continued motif in her works).

Eventually, the Abercrombies settled in Hyde Park, a creative oasis home to the University of Chicago. As a young woman, Abercrombie earned a degree in romance languages from the University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign. She also briefly studied at the American Academy of Art in Chicago. By the early 1930s, she began painting in earnest, creating desolate landscapes occupied by lone women, whom she based on herself. Her earliest works echoed traces of American landscape traditions while bringing something more cryptic to the fore.

"Her early paintings from the 1930s will have this very simplistic landscape, with green and a bright blue sky, but then all of a sudden there's this little figure on a path or with a church," said Dugan "This isn't just your regular landscape. This is something more magical, stranger. You want to lean in for the story."

Abercrombie took work, like many artists of her generation, with the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression, participating in the program from 1935 to 1940, producing one oil painting a month.

"Each month we all got—if we were first-class citizens, we all got $94 a month, which was marvelous in 1935," Abercrombie recounted to radio host Studs Terkel in her 1977 interview. "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."

During these years, she found deeper community ties, too, becoming involved with the South Side Community Arts Center and Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC). She would build lifelong friendships with musicians and artists including the musician James Purdy and painter Karl Priebe, and soon enough photographer Carl Van Vechten, jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie, painter John Wilde, and writer Wendell Wilcox, among others. In 1935, she would have a formative encounter with Gertrude Stein, the poet, writer, and collector, that would shape her worldview and her work.

Humphreville explained; "[Abercrombie] spoke of the encouragement Stein gave her, saying 'Gertrude Stein was the one who told me not to be sloppy in my painting. She told me I must learn to draw neatly and draw well.'" Beyond that, Stein's ideas and writings permeated Abercrombie's visual works. "The rhetorical effectiveness of repetition, questioning the distinction between inside and outside, and layers of realness—soon visually manifested themselves in Abercrombie's art and would remain features of it for the rest of her career," Humphreville added.
Abercrombie exhibited regularly during those years, and beyond Chicago. In 1940, her painting *White Cat* (ca. 1938) would be featured in the group exhibition "35 under 35" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Abercrombie, who was at the time married to her first husband, Robert Livingston, would also give birth to her only child, a daughter named Dinah, in 1942. But creativity, rather than domesticity, remained the center of Abercrombie's world.

The Jazz Witch

In 1944, the young family moved into the stately Victorian-era home at 5728 South Dorchester Avenue. This would be Abercrombie's home for the rest of her life. Here, the couple hosted a seemingly endless string of parties and performances with musicians from the jazz world. The likes of Sonny Rollins, Sarah Vaughn, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie frequented and often stayed over. During an era when Black musicians were often banned from many hotels, the home became a 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," curator Robert Cozzolino noted in an interview with NPR.

Dizzy Gillespie, in particular, would become a dear friend and confidante. In the 1950s, the Modern Jazz Quartet, an off-shoot of Gillespie's sextet, often lodged at the home. "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," the artist recalled.

During these years, her paintings homed in on a world of ciphers—the moon, lone women, cats, and towers, but the real world slipped in too. Abercrombie called her work "bop art" given its musical influences. One painting earned the title *Charlie Parker's Favorite Painting*—originally titled *Design for Death* (1946). She was immortalized in turn, too, with the pianist Richie Powell composing "Gertrude's Bounce." Abercrombie also loosely inspired the writer James Purdy's book *Gertrude of Stony Island*. Her own life continued with upheavals: In 1946, she and her first husband divorced and she soon married Frank Saniford, an ex-con and a music critic.

The radicalism of Abercrombie's milieu—her shirking of the conventional roles of wife and mother—and her embrace of often disenfranchised creative communities have certainly added to the fascination with her story.

"Abercrombie stands out as a very contemporary figure to me, someone who created a community with and for queer and Black artists in her orbit," said Eric Crosby, of the Carnegie Museum of Art, and co-curator of the exhibition. "She lived in creative practice with them and them with her. She believed so fully in the possibilities of self-discovery through art, and she created space for others to pursue the same."

While Abercrombie exhibited continuously throughout the 1950s, including an exhibition with Edwin Hewitt Gallery in New York in 1952, she was never overly ambitious toward earning national acclaim. By the late 1950s, her health had started to decline, due to alcoholism and arthritis, and she eventually depended on a wheelchair. Shortly before her death in 1977, the curator Don Baum, of Hyde Park Art Center, organized a retrospective of Abercrombie's work there, where she was feted with much of her community. "There is a special quality of personal artistic statement, her involvement with contemporary American art other than her own field, and her confident commitment to our city's rambunctiously active culture," wrote critic Dennis Adrian of the show.

When Abercrombie died later that year, Baum was named the executor of her estate. While her daughter and close friends were left several of her paintings, Baum saw to Abercrombie's wishes that the majority her paintings find homes at institutions throughout Illinois including the Art Institute, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Illinois State Museum in Springfield.

A Surrealist's Simple-Strange World

Gertrude Abercrombie has often been described as a Surrealist, a fitting description in many regards given the dream-inspired symbols and ciphers that occurred across her paintings: queens and countesses, owls, moons, and cryptic trees. Her mature style was developed largely individually, away from the direct influence of European Surrealists. What's more, she eschewed the painterliness. With her crisp, airtight uncanniness, her works fall in a most direct lineage to René Magritte, whom she called, late in life, her "spiritual daddy." Even then, her work bucked against easy categorization.

"Her stylistic clarity and embrace of the strange and uncanny coincided with the approaches adopted by a number of Americans in the 1930s and 1940s," wrote Humphreville in an essay for the exhibition catalogue. "In a quest to understand them and establish their art historical lineage, these works were contemporaneously labeled as surrealism, magic realism, fantasy painting, superrealism, and romanticism. In an American context, the boundaries of these terms were and are overlapping, fuzzy, and at times encompassed the work of certain regionalist and abstract artists."

But as otherworldly as these paintings could be, Abercrombie's inspirations were often found close to home. She quipped that she drew from "simple things that are a little strange" and that the enigmatic women who haunt her paintings were variations of herself, noting: "I always paint my face, I guess, when I paint people. It is the face I know best. And it's really the easiest for me because, you know, it is sort of like putting on makeup."

Cats, too, were proxies for the artist. The moon, another frequent motif, signaled the passage of time. “The meaning and function of these repeated motifs shifts, even if subtly, from painting to painting, which I think is part of what makes the use of repetition in her work so compelling,” Humphreville shared. “Abercrombie had a knack for finding the fantastic in the everyday.”

Many objects, strange as they may seem, were part of Abercrombie’s lived existence. She owned the shells that often appear in her compositions, for example. The landscapes of Aledo were based on real places, as were the lined-up sequences of doors that often appeared in her work, which could often be seen in Hyde Park as it underwent vast construction projects during urban renewal. “There’s a kind of simplicity and symbolism and directness and graphicness in her work that just translates so well to our time,” Dugan added of the contemporary attraction to her painting. “Her work just really cuts through.”

Dugan is glad Abercrombie’s work is getting a close critical and curatorial look; his one regret is that he didn’t get to meet her in person. “When you combine the radicality of her life, her story, and the emotive quality in the work, it casts a kind of spell,” he said. “People started realizing this was someone who was a genius and really, very few people figured it out until now. She was a master of our time. I have the feeling this is still just the start.”