

# HYPERALLERGIC

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### ERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE'S AMERICAN SURREALISM

by Ed Simon



Gertrude Abercrombie, "Split Personality" (1954) (photo by DePaul Art Museum; all images courtesy estate of Gertrude Abercrombie)

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PITTSBURGH — In 1935, a 26-year-old largely self-taught painter named Gertrude Abercrombie accompanied her friend, the writer Thornton Wilder, to a lecture at the University of Chicago in her native Hyde Park. There, she would meet the lecturer who would become a lifelong influence and mentor of sorts: Gertrude Stein. An irascible American modernist who not only revolutionized poetry but cultivated a salon of artists as an émigré in Paris, Stein told Abercrombie, “You gotta draw better.”

Drawing, however, was always secondary to painting for Abercrombie — it was her stark compositions with their idiosyncratic and personal visual vocabulary made up of recurring owls and cats, doors and moons, that made her such a fascinating figure within American surrealism. “Art has to be real crazy, real personal and real real, or it is nowhere,” Abercrombie once wrote. Hers certainly was. Unjustly marginalized since her death in 1977, which occurred due to an addiction to alcohol and after nearly two decades of producing few works, Abercrombie, and her arresting oeuvre will hopefully be discovered by a new audience in the Carnegie Museum of Art’s comprehensive retrospective, *The Whole World Is a Mystery*.

Abercrombie wasn’t one to take Stein’s critique personally, and she fashioned herself into the “other Gertrude,” hosting her own salons in her Chicago brownstone. Luminaries of the bebop jazz avant-garde counted themselves members of this confraternity, including Sonny Rollins and Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughan and Dizzy Gillespie. Feted as the “Queen of the Bohemians,” the tall, skinny, and angular Abercrombie saw herself as a kind of jazz witch forging her dream visions into a strange, eerie, and occult body of work.

As with any surrealist worth the designation, Abercrombie and her own psychic fractures were her greatest subject. “Self-Portrait, the Striped Blouse” (1940) — permanently housed at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and painted in 1940, the last year that she

produced work for the federal Works Progress Administration — is a mirror of Abercrombie's self-perception. Shrouded in darkness, the thin and rectilinear artist is in the corner of a bare room, her hand resting in a bowl of grapes. Behind partially pulled-back red curtains is an unsettling field at nighttime, an alien-like green tree silhouetted by moonlight, the hazy blue sfumato imbuing the scene suggesting a nocturne before dawn. The mask-like face of Abercrombie ironically echoes the same empty features of Stein in Pablo Picasso's celebrated portrait of 1905–06, and yet there is something to be said that here, the subject has rendered herself — an act of self-creation rather than mere observation.

Part of the uncanniness of Abercrombie's works paradoxically arises from the mutedness of her surrealism: Despite the occasional lions playing a game of chess, there are no melting clocks or locomotives emerging from fireplaces. The disquieting dream logic of an Abercrombie composition instead seems designed to unnerve more than to shock, a quintessentially American imagination that's less Salvador Dali than it is David Lynch. For that matter, despite her own claims of having been influenced by Stein, the literary modernist Abercrombie most resembles is another Pennsylvanian poet: the hermetic, occult prophetess H.D. Like H.D., Abercrombie is an artist whose storehouse of images is personal and eccentric, for both are creators of a mythopoesis in some ways inscrutable and impenetrable — but all the more alluring because of it. "At least I have the flowers of myself,/and my thoughts, no god/can take that," H.D. wrote in her 1917 poem "Eurydice." Those words apply equally to the painter.

Born to traveling opera-performer parents in Austin, Abercrombie was raised for a few years in small-town Illinois before moving to South Chicago, living in Hyde Park before the University of Chicago would decimate the multi-racial working-class community in the name of urban renewal and gentrification. Committed to principles of interracial solidarity and gender equality, Abercrombie's love of jazz (Gillespie famously called her a "bop artist") as well as her adamant refusal to conform to domestic expectations in her two marriages earned her the aforementioned royal sobriquet. In keeping with the tradition of European surrealists like Max Ernst, her work was always political, albeit filtered through a distinctly American sensibility. As the exhibition guide notes, "Design for Death" (1946) was supposedly Charlie Parker's favorite composition. In it, a ladder is propped against the trunk of a gnarled, blackened, and barren tree marked by moonlight on an otherwise ink-blue evening. A hangman's noose is tied across a branch. Potentially inspired by Billie Holliday's haunting rendition of the classic "Strange Fruit," the reference to lynching in the painting is obvious, while the distortions and the strange lighting — mainstays of Abercrombie — render their subject appropriately nightmarish.

Abercrombie's influences are clear, but like any great artist, she forges this disparate tangle into something unique. Her shadows, lines, and contorted perspectives evoke Giorgio de Chirico, while her colors and smooth surfaces, as well as her placement of regular objects in incongruous settings, recall René Magritte, whom she specifically mentioned in interviews. "Strange Shadows (Shadow and Substance)" (1950) exemplifies her style. A tall and thin woman in a turquoise dress, presumably the artist's double (she appears in many compositions), holds her hand aloft, but the shadow she casts is of a tree with an owl on a branch. Across from her, a smooth, white column with a blue glass placed atop it casts a shadow in the silhouette of a woman holding a glass. Stark and strange, the painting conjures her influences but is unmistakably Abercrombie's, the autobiographical figure so common in her work infusing the painting with the witchy, occult, hermetic sensibility that she cultivated.

Surprisingly, the artist Abercrombie reminded me of most wasn't Joan Miró or Man Ray — not even Leonora Carrington — but rather a surrealist of a different sort in the children's book illustrator Clement Hurd, celebrated for his pictures in Margaret Wise Brown's classic *Goodnight Moon* (1947). Both have a fondness for deceptive simplicity and clean lines; both are conversant with the charged mysticism of powerful archetypes and of lonely fields on a moonlit night. Such a comparison isn't to Abercrombie's detriment, but rather to Hurd's elevation. More importantly, it speaks to a certain shared Americanness between them — while Abercrombie never denied her similarity to the Surrealists, her own program was fundamentally hers alone, a rugged individualist on a psychic errand into the wilderness. What Abercrombie's work exemplified was her own

principle of the “point of contact,” the place where subjectivities collide, even if they aren’t mutually comprehensible. A point of contact makes a space for communication — not in spite of, but because of the mysteries of personhood. The Carnegie’s enigmatic exhibition, threaded through with Abercombe’s repeating motifs of night and the moon, ladders and doors, exemplifies such communication. It’s an experience that feels as much as having your Tarot read as it does a trip to the museum.