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WHY SURREALIST PAINTER GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE FEELS MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER

by Casey Lesser



Gertrude Abercrombie, *Queen and Owl in Tree*, 1954. Illinois State Museum Purchase. Courtesy of the Illinois State Museum and the Estate of Gertrude Abercrombie.

“Seems like Gertrude was kind of trouble,” said a teenaged girl to her friend as they sat gazing at a series of paintings at the Carnegie Museum of Art’s Gertrude Abercrombie retrospective “The Whole World Is a Mystery.” The show, on view through June 1st (before traveling on to the Colby College Museum of Art this July), focuses on 85 paintings and the late American Surrealist’s unconventional life—her vibrant Chicago salons of the 1940s and ’50s; her numerous lovers and queer community; her disinterest in motherhood; and her four prolific decades of painting, in her words, “simple things that are a little strange.”

The teen stood up and approached the 8-by-10-inch painting *Untitled (Lady with Cat)* (1961), which shows a slender, blindfolded woman in a pink gown. The twist is that her dress and long black hair are pierced to the wall behind her with giant pins, preventing her from gliding towards a blue door and a small black cat. “So dope,” the girl said.

Clearly, Abercrombie’s enduring appeal transcends generations. Across her work from the late 1930s to the early ’70s, Abercrombie masterfully distilled emotion into deceptively simple imagery—from forlorn ladies and mystical figures to crescent moons, doors, cats, seashells, and pink carnations. Rather than merely a visual language to be decoded, the paintings are instinctual responses to her own experiences as well as more universal 20th-century strife—the Great Depression, post-World War II anxieties. Ultimately, Abercrombie’s steadfast commitment to her own enigmatic vision has catapulted her work across time, driving fresh interest nearly five decades since her death.

Born in 1909 in Austin, Texas, Abercrombie spent most of her life in Chicago. Her career as an artist took root in the 1930s, when she joined the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project. The WPA provided financial support to Abercrombie—along with a host of major American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart Benton—during the Great Depression and allowed her to refine her distinct visual language. “That gave me a big start and a boost,” she later recalled in an interview with writer and historian Studs Terkel, published in the retrospective catalogue. “God bless Franklin Delano Roosevelt.”

So began her timeless practice that draws the viewer into an enigmatic world that feels deeply personal, somewhat familiar, and undeniably intriguing. “She was not playing for the galleries; she was not gaming art history—she was just doing exactly what she knew how to do,” said Eric Crosby, director of the Carnegie Museum of Art and co-curator of the Abercrombie retrospective, alongside Sarah Humphreville, curator of American art at the Colby College Museum of Art.

These surreal, elegant compositions often portray desolate landscapes and spare interiors populated by people, animals, or small objects. The lone, solemn woman with black hair who appears often bears a likeness to the artist herself. And in works where humans are absent, creatures and objects become compelling actors, weaving spellbinding mysteries of their own, often set within ornate frames the artist collected.

By the 1940s and 1950s, Abercrombie had become a cultural force in Chicago, hosting lively salons at her Hyde Park home. These gatherings brought together artists, writers, and jazz musicians, including trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and saxophonist Charlie Parker.

“She was creating space for others to be creative and had such close relationships with so many artists and poets,” said Crosby. “She created space for Black jazz musicians—she played the piano and had jam sessions at her house. She had many friends and lovers within a queer community of painters and poets. There’s a space of creativity that she created and shared with other people that feels really contemporary.”

Abercrombie’s Surrealism and symbols

That contemporary nature is palpable in the current retrospective—the most comprehensive museum presentation of Abercrombie’s work to date—co-organized by the Carnegie Museum of Art and the Colby College Museum of Art.

“The Whole World Is a Mystery” traces Abercrombie’s career chronologically, from “day to night,” as Crosby described it. “You feel a sense of fullness in the work at the beginning, and then it slowly diminishes. The works become smaller, the focus of her vision much more acute.” Early works show landscapes dotted with trees and cloudy skies or sweeping Surrealist works like *Strange Shadows (Shadow and Substance)* (1950), in which a woman, an owl, a blue cup on a pedestal, and a clock on what appears to be a stage, cast shadows that playfully riff on reality. Over time, those landscapes grow darker, skies turn from pale blue to navy and black, and waning crescent moons become the protagonists.

Though often described as Surrealism, Abercrombie’s work was distinct from that of her peers. “This isn’t the abstract, symbolic space of a [Salvador] Dalí painting,” Crosby said, nodding to *The Stroll* (1943), in which our protagonist walks along a path with a cat surrounded by fields of grass. “This is literally a Midwestern landscape that she’s walked through,” Crosby said. Indeed, while the strange rooms and landscapes are at times filled with the fantastical, they reference everyday realities.

“These are Midwestern buildings that she’s been in,” Crosby continued. “I think it’s always grounded in the real, grounded in where she came from. These are interior spaces that she lived in. You can imagine these are moons that she’s seen.”

The second half of the show prominently features two of Abercrombie’s most compelling motifs: doors and seashells. The doors reflect both real and imagined thresholds—rooted in the physical landscape of Chicago’s South Side, where they once served as makeshift barriers amid demolition and gentrification. Meanwhile, her meticulously rendered seashells evoke both tangible objects and abstract portals, their spirals drawing the viewer deeper into the picture plane.

These “symbols” were not necessarily embedded with specific meaning; rather, they reflected the artist’s world and what she felt compelled to paint. One can tell from the paintings alone, for example,

that Abercrombie was most definitely a cat person.

Abercrombie's rediscovery and resurgence

Despite being well-regarded within Chicago's art circles and having exhibitions during her lifetime, Abercrombie never reached a level of renown that would ensure her longevity.

"The story of American art that we have been told for decades centers on New York and California, to the detriment of incredible artists from the middle of the country," noted Brendan Dugan, owner of Karma, the gallery that shows the artist's work. "Abercrombie was unfairly dismissed as 'regional' and overlooked by the mainstream art world."

Geography wasn't the only factor. As a woman artist working in the mid-20th century, she faced the same structural barriers that sidelined many of her female contemporaries. And while her work defied easy categorization, her unusual persona—her costumey clothes, raucous social life, proclivity for mysticism—led many to disregard her artistic achievements.

"She was often written off as merely an eccentric when she was, in fact, an amazingly subtle and inventive painter," Dugan added.

By the late 1960s, Abercrombie's health had deteriorated due to ongoing medical issues and financial hardship. She became less active in the art world, and her reputation faded following her death in 1977.

Yet that's been changing in recent years. One turning point came in 2018, when Karma mounted a lauded New York exhibition of Abercrombie's work. Roberta Smith, writing for the *New York Times*, remarked that the show gave Abercrombie "a new visibility that should be coaxed into an even greater fullness." Another milestone was the news of the retrospective, which was originally a smaller show that Crosby had planned for the Carnegie Museum, intended to take place prior to the pandemic.

"One of the realities of the world is that people often start paying attention when certain prices start being achieved or certain auction estimates are overachieved," said Humphreville, co-curator of the retrospective.

Such is the case with Abercrombie, whose top 10 auction results were all set since May 2021. Many of those records were set by Hindman Auction house, which held a sale of 21 works by Abercrombie from the private collection of Laura and Gary Maurer. The sale shattered expectations, resetting Abercrombie's auction record.

"2022 was the year of Abercrombie at Hindman and beyond," said Zachary Wirsum, the Hindman specialist who organized the sale and is an expert on her market. "That year, *The Dinosaurs* (1964) sold for \$387,500, followed by *Untitled (Woman with Tethered Horse and Moon)* (1947), which hit \$437,500."

Since then, her auction record has been broken multiple times, with the latest benchmark set at Bonhams this past November for one of her larger canvases, **Silo at Aledo** (1953), which sold for \$864,100, more than eight times its low estimate. The demand for Abercrombie's work has even led to instances of forgery, a sign of just how sought-after the work has become.

"I think the market attention has certainly led to a lot of accelerated interest in her," Humphreville added, "but I think that's also all the more reason why it was necessary to do a museum exhibition and really give devoted, serious scholarship to her."

Why Abercrombie's artwork resonates now

Examining Abercrombie's work now also surfaces the connection between her times and ours.

"She was an artist who was coming up in a very turbulent time in history—beginning in the Great

Depression and on through the rest of the middle of the 20th century—who also experienced a lot of emotional turbulence,” Humphreville said. “I think that feels really relevant to audiences now. There’s a lot of appeal in someone proposing through their art a different idea of what could be.”

Stylistically, Abercrombie’s singular approach feels at home alongside contemporary painting. “Her idiosyncratic style of flat backgrounds, repeated symbols, consistent palettes, and simple contours, as well as her depiction of female protagonists that were most often ciphers for herself, resonates with and in many ways foreshadowed developments in contemporary figurative painting,” Dugan noted, pointing to artists like Maja Ruznic and Nicolas Party as part of her artistic lineage.

Abercrombie’s resurgence also parallels the broader recognition of women Surrealists who have recently gained renewed attention, including Leonora Carrington and Leonor Fini. “I do think Abercrombie’s rise is part of a greater new appreciation for Surrealists and female Surrealists more specifically,” said Wirsum.

As the art world continues to reexamine overlooked voices, Abercrombie’s ability to conjure deeply personal yet universal imagery makes her work feel as fresh and compelling as ever. “She marched to the beat of her own drum—she was just doing her thing,” Crosby said. Decades later, that thing still feels timeless.