

THE QUEEN OF CHICAGO: GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE AT KARMA

By Natalie Sandstrom



Gertrude Abercrombie, *Moored to the Moon*, 1963. Oil on board, 8 x 10 inches.  
Private collection, courtesy Karma Gallery.

When I was little and couldn't sleep, my mother would tell me to close my eyes and imagine meeting her in Dreamland. Over the years this made up place achieved a fully outlined map: Lemonade Lake was my preferred meeting place with Mom. The pictorial world of Gertrude Abercrombie (1909-1977) feels, to me, like a warped version of my own Dreamland. Her dark palette, cloudy skies, mysterious shadows, and (my personal favorite) ladders leading to the moon are mystical and, indeed, dreamy, though with the exhilarating potential to turn more sinister. On view in New York for the first time in more than 60 years, Karma Gallery's selection of 70 portraits, still lifes, and landscapes celebrates the work of the woman who famously, and with some justification, dubbed herself the "Queen of Chicago."

The daughter of opera singers, Abercrombie lived most of her life in Chicago's bohemian quarter, Hyde Park, where she became a central figure in the social scene. A jazz lover and herself a very capable musician, she was close friends with Dizzy Gillespie: There is a touching photograph of the two hugging reproduced in Karma's gorgeous 400-plus page publication accompanying the exhibition. Her large South Side home was always brimful of creative luminaries, and in dubbing herself the "other Gertrude" she saw herself as Chicago's Gertrude Stein. Within such a dazzling social circle, it is no wonder that Abercrombie's interior life – her inspiration – would be as riveting. Thinking of herself as rather witchy (even labeling herself a "good witch" to a group of interested children, as recounted to Studs Terkel

in the interview from 1977 published in the book), Abercrombie had a mystical way about her, which comes across in her paintings. Recurring motifs include black cats, haunted-looking women (often herself), shells, moons, and doors. While painted with care, her work always seems a bit misty, ready to be the setting of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, or voiced-over with “It was a dark and stormy night...”

The show moves chronologically and clockwise through Karma’s two luminous and spacious rooms, opening with the tiny *Untitled (Slaughterhouse at Aledo)* (1934), and closing with a signature example of her door series, *The Door and the Rock* (1971). Abercrombie’s subject matter remains consistent throughout her oeuvre, but the variation of composition and her impeccable ability to create an immersive mood even from small objects (paintings here range from one inch square to three feet on the longest side) nonetheless create a dynamic exhibition. With its down-the-rabbit-hole effect, it is very easy to lose track of time in this exhibition.

Ever the jazz aficionado, Abercrombie thought of herself as a “Bop” painter. This style is evident in her 1945 painting *Untitled (Blue Screen, Black Cat, Print of Same)*. Sedate in her typical blue-grey palette, the painting exudes improvisational whimsy. As the title implies, the painting is of a room with a cat half behind a blue screen, and a picture on the wall of the same room – the blue screen, green floor, and little black cat, but sneakily without anything on its miniaturized wall. This rhythmic variation feels like a solo spot: adding distinctive flare to a still-recognizable standard.

Abercrombie once said that she didn’t think of herself as a good painter, but as a good artist. I believe that her artistry came from her storytelling ability. Though she did have a rather naive painterly style, this forefronted the composite image rather than drawing attention to the intricacies of a delicate technique. Her paintings adopt the language of the music she loved: carefully constructed compositions like twisting and folding melodies; colors like the key signature that sets the tone; textures like a little vibrato at the end of a phrase. Individually the parts don’t make a lot of sense, but together the piece works.

*Reverie* (1947) exemplified this unique storytelling, and my experience with this painting characterized the show for me. While it was easy to pick out the Abercrombie stamp, here her motif of the bare tree, the more I looked, the more mysterious the piece became. This is odd, as one would think that the more time you spend with an object the more you can grasp it. But I was excited to find so many works in this show that instead seemed to change the more I stared at them. In *Reverie*, I noticed how the woman’s lounging pose mimicked the languor of the blackened tree branches, the way they both pointed to the strange brick structure in the distance. With no doors, no windows, what is it? I saw the water in the background, the patch of ground illuminated by a pink-tinged moon. I was riveted by a white shape on the ground: a handkerchief? A sheet of paper? The enigmatic scene is an intellectual challenge while remaining captivating in its surreal quality. I could imagine one of Abercrombie’s owls outside the scope of the frame hooting softly, or a line of melody from Miles Davis drifting in.

In an illuminating essay, Susan Weinger quotes Abercrombie on dreams and Surrealism: “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... Only mystery and fantasy have been added. All the foolishness has been taken out.” Although the imagery and

intentional anachronism in Abercrombie conjures a plethora of associations with such Surrealists as Max Ernst, René Magritte, or early work by Giorgio de Chirico, one is as likely to think of fellow women artists as these canonical males. Besides such obvious candidates as Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning, Honoré Sharrer, another Surrealist, came to mind: Her motifs of birds and use of jewel tones invert Abercrombie's somber style. As does the contemporary video work, BRIGIT (2016), by Turner Prize nominee Charlotte Prodger, in conjunction with Abercrombie's radiantly blue depiction of a veiled St. Brigit from 1963.

Abercrombie's witchery conjures such sisterhood, feeding this viewer's appetite for narrative imagery from powerful ladies (full disclosure, I'm a student at Smith College.) I wonder, also, how the context of #MeToo is going to impact the rediscovery of the Queen of Chicago. Indeed the show did feel particularly prescient, and I wondered what this powerful woman would think about the political timing of her renaissance.

The final piece of the show wrapped everything up nicely – by which I mean it left many lingering questions. The placement of *The Door and the Rock* (1971) has a symbolism worthy of Abercrombie herself. This modestly sized painting – not even a foot square – of a cracked rock sitting in turquoise water, near a red-orange door resting on the water, or perhaps connected to a wall that blends in to the charcoal sky, accompanies the viewer upon exiting the gallery, leaving me to wonder: Does the door in the painting lead to the watery world pictured, or is it a portal to some other fantastic psychological dreamland?