

GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE & THE JAZZ MEN OF CHICAGO

By L. Brandon Krall



*That's Gertrude Abercrombie, I'm visiting her house on the South Side. She to me is one of the most taken-for-granted artists and originals around the scene for years. Gertrude, well, a friend of jazz people for many years way back in the early days. Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie early days. I was thinking in mentioning Gillespie, the current issue of Chicago Magazine has a very beautiful article about you and Dizzy who visits you when he said, Gertrude, that your paintings, are like his bop music.*

Studs Terkel, Radio Interview

A rich hoard of paintings by an American woman from the area of Chicago is on view at the KARMA gallery, located in the east village @ 188 East 2nd Street between Avenues A and B, Summer Hours Monday–Friday 10am–6pm, (212) 390-8290. The exhibition, organized with Dan Nadel, will be on view from August 9–September 23, 2018. Gertrude Abercrombie born in 1909, was of the generation affected by Surrealism but her approach was individual and she gave her attention to dreams and mystery. She was from a family of musicians and as a painter she was self taught. Taken into the WPA program in 1935 as an “easel painter” her canvases range in size from tiny miniatures to canvases no larger than 2 feet high or wide. Of note in this exhibition, after studying the paintings with their recurrent motifs, is the collection of diverse frames. She acknowledges the influence of Magritte as her “spiritual daddy” and there is a noticeable affinity at times, but her light and the fineness of brushwork recalls Kay Sage as well.

Studs Terkel interviewed Gertrude Abercrombie in the last year of her life, 1977. She was still living in the house where her guests and friends gathered when they were playing in town and her circles included jazz luminaries Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Sonny Rollins, and Richie Powell. Studs Terkel and other writers were also frequent visitors. It is his interview quoted above that is published by KARMA in a comprehensive monograph of Gertrude Abercrombie's artwork with essays by Robert Cozzolino, Robert Storr and Susan Weininger.

To be a witch was a kind of popular fad with her generation and she was sometimes called one. She described this to Terkel: I was coming home from the store, rolling my little old cart. A bunch of little children, about six or eight of them, ran into the bushes saying, "Here comes the witch. Here comes the witch." I was mortified, of course, but one little boy came out just as I passed and he said, "Are you really a witch?" I just stopped dead in my tracks, as they say, and I said, "Yes I am, but do you know there are good witches and there are bad witches? I'm a good witch." He giggled and ran back into the bushes with the other children and told them that I was a good witch and they never bothered me since.

Gertrude was married and kept cats for pets. She had a house in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago where the University of Chicago is located and historian Robert Storr in "The Other Gertrude," writes wonderfully, about the neighborhood and his terrific subtle perceptions of Abercrombie, as a local kid growing up a block away. Storr's essay with observations on our current times is a must read in the handsome green bound catalogue; an affordable limited edition. This show, in the spacious KARMA gallery with a very fine bookstore a block away, are excellent reasons to visit the far east side of Second Street.