

ARTFORUM

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GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE

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Gertrude Abercrombie: Birds, Eggs and Dominoes with Pyramid, 1963, oil on board, painted wooden fram,e11 x 13”

Gertrude Abercrombie (1909–1977) painted gloomy nightscapes and forlorn domestic scenes that revealed her internal state more than the outside world. She also made portraits, landscapes, and still lifes often influenced by the Midwestern environments of Aledo, Illinois, where she spent much of her childhood. The seventy works in this show, made between 1930 and 1971—dolorous vignettes in hushed blues, greens, and shadowy grays—utterly beguiled.

Abercrombie moved to Chicago with her parents in 1916 and lived there until the end of her life. She was primarily self-taught, although she briefly attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the American Academy of Art before taking commercial work in fashion retail illustration. Her artistic emergence in the early 1930s during the Great Depression—a socioeconomic mirror to her saturnine aesthetic—blossomed under the auspices of US federal work programs such as the Public Works of Art Project and the Works Progress Administration, as well as local arts organizations. A rapacious egotist, she was her own muse, as benevolent and grand as she was insecure and jealous. The self-coronated “Queen of Chicago” hosted regular gatherings for artists, literary figures, and jazz musicians. Her many friends and associates included the artists Dudley Huppler, Tud Kempf, and Karl Priebe; writer Wendell Wilcox; and jazz legends Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, and Sarah Vaughan.

Abercrombie is considered a Surrealist; she admired René Magritte. Indeed, she utilized dreamlike imagery in the service of existential concerns, but she did so with stylistic restraint and an acute sense of self by incorporating characters—including queens and witches—that she played in real life, forging her own brand of melancholic symbolism. She set a cavalcade of moons, crowns, carnations, eggs, clouds, shells, solemn-faced cats, and owls, as well as household objects—telephones, Victorian furniture, keys—within open fields, crepuscular skies, or eerie, monastic rooms. These talismans aided her construction of ethereal realms conducive to her search for understanding and connectivity. Among her recurring figures are a colorless Riding Hood on lonely journeys (Untitled [Figure on Moonlit Path], n.d.); a cheerless ingenue peering from the window of various sepulchral dwellings (Untitled [Station and Shed], 1963); and a seer who is neither fully human nor entirely spectral communing with the heavens (Star and Crescent, 1948). Trees are a common feature, too, depicted as both jagged remnants and living corses, bound to the emotional conditions of Abercrombie's haunted women. Moonlight Path (Visit at Midnite) 1941, with its vulnerable-looking protagonist treading a sullen countryside, is one heartrending example.

In Landscape with Church, 1939, a woman is on a country path, with a miniature chapel some ways off in a vast, rolling panorama. The work depicts a marvelous submission of religion to the inexorable swell of the natural world. The scale of the holy edifice might be a reflection of the disdain Abercrombie had for her mother's stringent Christian Scientist beliefs, which caused a rift between them. It must have contributed to the artist's sense of abandonment—likely deepened by two failed marriages—that furthered her descent into sickness and alcoholism in her later, cloistered years. At the core of Abercrombie's oeuvre is an authenticity that can be attributed to the trust she placed in images that came to her through reveries. Yet her struggles with purpose, aloneness, rationality, and trauma, even throughout her many astral planes, located her within the mysterious complexities of the real.