

Karma is pleased to present Gertrude Abercrombie's first exhibition in New York since 1952. Abercrombie (1909–1977), a key figure in mid-century American Surrealism, was a *sui generis* artist who, from the late 1930s until her death, painted images populated by objects of personal significance—including moons, towers, cats, barren trees, owls, hats, pennants, winding paths, grapes, bridges, Victorian furniture, shells, snails, and doors—to create allegories for her own sometimes perilous emotional and psychological states. Often residing over these symbols was Gertrude herself, who appears in numerous pictures as proud observer, defiant actor, and witchy caricature.

This exhibition, comprised of loans from institutions and private collections, is the most comprehensive look at Abercrombie's artwork in nearly three decades.

Abercrombie, the only daughter of Opera singer parents, was born in Texas, and grew up in Germany, and Aledo, Illinois, before settling in 1916 in Hyde Park, Chicago, where she spent the rest of her life. Aledo and its hills, ruins, and trees—the distinctly midwestern landscape she adored most—remained a constant in her work. She took art classes at the American Academy of Art and the School of the Art Institute. In 1933 she was appointed to the Public Works of Art Project (the first of the government supported arts programs), which gave her the time to find her subject matter and approach.

Abercrombie exhibited in Art Institute Annuals and galleries in both Chicago and New York in the 1940s and 50s and became the center of several overlapping circles of Chicago and midwestern culture. As Susan Weininger has written, “She thought of herself as the ‘other Gertrude’ who hosted a Chicago Salon including jazz musicians, writers, and artists; the liquor flowed freely and she presided imperiously as the self-appointed ‘Queen of Chicago.’” This salon, hosted in her spacious home on Dorchester Avenue, was remarkably progressive: Two of her closest artist friends, Dudley Huppler and Karl Priebe, were openly gay, and from the 1940s through the 1960s her domain was a safe haven for African-American musicians who needed a place to stay, practice, or just rest. Many, including Dizzy Gillespie, formed life-long relationships with the artist, who in turn referred to herself as a “Bop” artist. Gillespie later wrote: “Gertrude Abercrombie...has taken the essence of our music and transported it into another form.”

Abercrombie's restrained palette and minimal compositions foreground her repeating imagery, which can be read as autobiographical puzzles that, when unscrambled, reveal a complicated, often tortured life, but one which begs examination and discussion. Just before she died, Abercrombie was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center. By then Abercrombie,

who valued her own work, had made sure to keep or buy back many of her finest examples, which her Trust later distributed to museums around the United States, and in particular the Illinois State Museum. In typical poetic, tough, and funny form, when she spoke to Studs Terkel about attending her own 1977 opening, Abercrombie said she would “go out either in a blizzard or in a blaze of glory.”

Karma wishes to thank Doug Stapleton and the Illinois State Museum, Jenny Gibbs and the Elmhurst Art Museum, Laura and Gary Maurer, and Susan Weininger for their support of this exhibition.

Karma has published a comprehensive monograph of Gertrude Abercrombie’s artwork, with essays by Robert Cozzolino, Robert Storr, and Susan Weininger, and an interview by Studs Terkel.

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