

Gertrude
Abercrombie:
The Whole World
Is a Mystery

Guide

Born in Austin, Texas, Gertrude Abercrombie (1909–1977) produced hundreds of paintings imbued with autobiography that revealed her emotional truth and declared it as real. A critical figure in the mid-20th-century Chicago art and jazz scenes, Abercrombie made art to give her internal life visual form. She put herself into her painted world—in self-portraits, landscapes, domestic scenes, and still lifes—through the use of personal symbols and enigmatic female figures. She probed her consciousness, mined her memories, drew on her dreams, and found the peculiar in everyday life, painting, as she said, “simple things that are a little strange.”

Abercrombie lived in defiance of her era’s social norms. As a white woman, she surrounded herself with Black jazz musicians. She created community with queer painters, poets, and others outside the mainstream. She married and divorced twice, had many sexual partners, and displayed minimal interest in motherhood. By blending layers of reality, her paintings similarly question existence as commonly understood and posit alternate dimensions. Though Abercrombie had a singular vision, her reliance on her inner consciousness and use of a fantastical style connected her to broader developments in American modernism. Across the country, other artists made art as a means for understanding self and its relationship to the precarity of contemporary life, many using surrealist strategies.

This retrospective exhibition—the first nationally touring presentation of Abercrombie’s art—celebrates an artist who has been historically marginalized due to who she was and how she lived and worked. She created a universe that broadens our understanding of American art history and identity. As she observed, “the whole world is a mystery,” a statement that asserts expansive possibilities for liberation and self-discovery through art.

Everything Is Autobiographical

Abercrombie had a peripatetic early childhood, living in Austin, Texas; Ravinia, Illinois; Berlin, Germany; Aledo, Illinois; and finally, Chicago. She attended the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, after which she returned to Chicago. She enmeshed herself in the city's art scene, joining artists' groups and showing in galleries, outdoor art fairs, and annual exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1935, Abercrombie attended a lecture by novelist, poet, and art collector Gertrude Stein. Ideas conveyed in Stein's talk—the rhetorical effectiveness of repetition, questioning the distinction between inside and outside, and the emotional nature of reality—would soon manifest themselves in Abercrombie's paintings.

That same year, Abercrombie gained employment on a New Deal program established by Franklin Delano Roosevelt to support artists during the Great Depression. By the late 1930s, Abercrombie's painting practice was blossoming, and she produced the first mature work of her career. She moved into a new apartment in Chicago's Hyde Park. It would inspire her paintings of claustrophobic interiors, just as Aledo—which she always considered her hometown—became the backdrop for her landscapes. Tightly executed and dominated by a palette of icy blues, steely grays, and sultry greens, her new compositions pulsed with personality and mystery and were replete with private references.

1 *Slaughterhouse Ruins at Aledo, 1937*
oil on canvas
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

2 *Self-Portrait, 1942*
oil on Masonite
The Art Institute of Chicago, Bequest of Katharine Kuh

3 *Self-Portrait, the Striped Blouse, 1940*
oil on canvas
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Henry C. Gibson Fund

Abercrombie employed self-portraiture throughout her oeuvre as a way to express relationships between her inner and outer worlds. In this painting, the artist emerges from the shadowed corner of the room and is illuminated, presumably, by a hidden moon glowing outside of the window. The view closely resembles Abercrombie's landscapes imagined from memories of Aledo, Illinois, where she spent part of her childhood and continued to visit. While some of her self-representations are perplexing and expressed through altered identities, in this work, Abercrombie affirms her place in the world, and at a moment when her art practice was receiving considerable recognition.

4 *Tree at Aledo, 1938*
oil on canvas
Elmhurst University Art Collection, Elmhurst, Illinois

5 *Figure in a Landscape, 1939*
oil on Masonite
Private collection, New York

6 *Winding Road, 1937*
oil on board
The Iribe Collection

7 *White Cat, ca. 1938*
oil on canvas
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Transfer from General Services Administration

White Cat reveals many of the devices that Abercrombie employed to establish uncanny moods in her paintings. Set in her apartment, this confined scene is populated with a few select objects, among them a framed painting—a picture in a picture. It is a window into a parallel world in which a female protagonist makes her way across a plain, guided by a white cat. Such movement is impossible for the inhabitants—and by extension the viewer—of the room, who occupy a space with a hingeless door.

Subtle shifts in perspective further unsettle the space. The floorboards do not share a consistent vanishing point; the room is on shaky ground, adding to the scene's physical precarity and emotional unease.

8 *Interior, 1938*
oil on panel
University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts at Illinois State University, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

9 *The Past and the Present, ca. 1945*
oil on Masonite
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

10 *Tree, Table, and Cat, 1937*
oil on canvas
Private collection, Illinois

Many of Abercrombie's paintings are populated by solitary women—archetypes that function as proxies for the artist, who said, "it's always myself that I paint." In this work, a figure clad in a long black dress wearing a flat-brimmed hat stands against a dead tree that interrupts an open plain. The tree sets an ominous tone, but it also provides refuge for the woman, who clutches the trunk. Though her body and face are in profile, she glances backward, indicating that she may be hiding from an unseen presence beyond the boundaries of the canvas. Her feline companion sits in the middle ground and watches the table intently, as if awaiting an arrival. The scene is still, but the action, uncertain in nature, is merely paused.

11 *The Pump, 1938*
oil on canvas
Western Illinois University, Courtesy of the Fine Arts Collection, US General Services Administration New Deal Art Project

12 *The Church, 1938*
oil on canvas
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

13 *Out in the Country, 1939*
oil on canvas
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee

14 *Letter from Karl, 1940*
oil on canvas
Union League Club of Chicago

Bop Art

Throughout the 1940s, Abercrombie created narratively complex paintings that often reflected her experience of specific events, including her tumultuous love life. She populated these compositions with a growing repertoire of personal symbols that could be variously assembled to elicit emotional responses and convey visual jokes. Among the objects that entered her visual lexicon were row houses, a chaise longue, an ivory tower, flag-topped tents, and owls. Her repetition was akin to how her jazz musician friends created bebop music by improvising with fixed chord patterns. Trumpet virtuoso Dizzy Gillespie recognized the relevance of her art to jazz: “Gertrude Abercrombie is *the* bop artist, bop in the sense that she has taken the essence of our music and transported it into another art form.”

Abercrombie’s stylistic embrace of the bizarre coincided with visual approaches—variously labeled as surrealism, magic realism, and fantasy painting—adopted by a number of Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. Abercrombie never opposed these descriptors, but for her it was her conception of the “real” that mattered. She declared, “Art has to be real ‘crazy,’ real personal and real real, or it is nowhere.” She expressed her internal world and opened it to viewers, initiating what she called “the point of contact. . . where the viewer meets the artist’s idea, emotion, or experience.”

15 *The Stroll*, 1943
oil on fiberboard
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

16 *The Visit*, 1944
oil on canvas
Private collection, Los Angeles

17 *Charlie Parker’s Favorite Painting*, 1946
oil on Masonite
Ackland Art Museum, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

While much of Abercrombie’s work was apolitical, she created this painting as a condemnation of lynching. Originally titled *Design for Death*, this setting centers a yellow noose hanging from a dead tree with a ladder leaning against it. Beneath the rope rests a matching yellow crate. While the meaning of the other objects is not explicit, these items have been assembled to perpetrate racially motivated murder. The painting, accordingly, is filled with menace. While Abercrombie may have been inspired

by Billie Holiday’s 1939 song “Strange Fruit,” in 1946, the country experienced a flurry of racial violence—much of it directed toward Black soldiers returning from World War II—which likewise could have provoked her to make this work.

18 *Where or When (Things Past)*, 1948
oil on canvas
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

19 *The Chess Game*, 1948
oil on canvas
Illinois State Museum, Purchase

20 *Reverie*, 1947
oil on Masonite
Illinois State Museum, Purchase

21 *White House*, 1945
oil on panel
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago, Gift of Leon and Marian Despres

22 *Strange Shadows (Shadow and Substance)*, 1950
oil on canvas
Private collection, Illinois

Strange Shadows (Shadow and Substance) is replete with instances of doubling, suggesting two possible directions for Abercrombie’s life. The three-dimensional subjects represent the path she took: the figure in the blue dress is a stand-in for the artist, and the white pedestal symbolizes her second husband, Frank Sandiford. The shadows on the wall—attached to, but with forms independent from the objects before them—signify her abandoned first marriage. The female form is once again Abercrombie, and her first husband, Robert Livingston, is represented as a shadow of a dead tree. The clock in the middle of these characters stands for Abercrombie and Livingston’s daughter, Dinah, a child caught in the middle of adults’ affairs. The time on the clock is 11:28, marking the moment of Dinah’s birth.

23 *The Bride*, 1946
oil on panel
Western Illinois University, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

24 *The Ivory Tower*, 1945
oil on Masonite
Collection of Bernard Friedman, Courtesy of Lincoln Glenn Gallery, New York

25 *A Game of Kings*, 1947
oil on canvas
Private collection, Illinois

Several of Abercrombie’s paintings executed from 1946 to 1950 are visual attempts to process her chaotic love life. By the mid-1940s, her marriage to Robert Livingston was falling apart as both partners pursued extramarital affairs; in Abercrombie’s case, with aspiring writer and jazz aficionado Frank Sandiford, who she would marry in 1948. In this work, two male lions represent these men. They sit in Victorian chairs at a wooden table playing a game of chess, competing for the watchful queen’s affection. The player on the left has only a black knight and king remaining, his opponent just a white rook and king. Who has the next move? The viewer—like the queen—is left in limbo amid this frozen moment.

26 *Between Two Camps*, 1948
oil on Masonite
Illinois State Museum, Gift of Marian and Leon Despres

27 *Midnight Stroll (Girl Searching)*, 1945
oil on Masonite
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter

28 *Figure Facing East*, 1947
oil on Masonite
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Ducommun and Gross Endowment

29 *Two Ladders*, 1947
oil on Masonite
Illinois State Museum, Purchase

Queen Gertrude

Over the course of the 1950s, Abercrombie produced nearly 500 paintings, some of which were executed at miniature scale. Her compositions emphasized themes of love, struggle, games, and sorcery—reflections of her life. She expanded her repertoire of fantastical narratives and symbolism, introducing new motifs like giraffes, dice, dominoes, and a marble-topped table. Referred to affectionately as Queen Gertrude by her bohemian cohort, Abercrombie increasingly added this persona to her paintings, perhaps a reflection of her growing artistic and social confidence.

Abercrombie continued to exhibit, sell her work regularly, and meet with critical success. She staged displays of her paintings in her home and also showed them in museums and galleries, primarily in the Midwest and New York City. The frequency of her commercial opportunities peaked in 1952 and 1953 with nine solo shows in those two years. Amid this success, she wrote, “I’m painting like crazy again,” to artist Karl Priebe, her closest friend.

30 *Untitled (Ballet for Owl)*, 1952
oil on board
Collection of Bernard Friedman, Courtesy of Lincoln Glenn Gallery, New York

31 *A Terribly Strange Tree*, 1949
oil on panel
Western Illinois University, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

32 *Queen and Owl in Tree*, 1954
oil on Masonite
Illinois State Museum, Purchase

Here, a crowned queen, wrapped in a heraldic ermine-bordered robe, holds court with a large perched owl, both directly gazing at the viewer, as if to assert their positions. Abercrombie produced many works featuring owls around the same time artists in her circle were similarly rendering animals and plants with increasing fervor, indicating a dialogue between their art practices. Abercrombie was known as “Queen Gertrude” to her closest friends, such as artist Karl Priebe, novelist James Purdy, and jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie. She regularly hosted parties, salons, and jam sessions at her home, and, beginning in 1948, she held court at the local Hyde Park Outdoor Art Fair, where she exhibited paintings propped against her vintage Rolls-Royce.

33 *The Queen*, 1954
oil on board
Collection of Bernard Friedman, Courtesy of Lincoln Glenn Gallery, New York

34 *Search for Rest (Nile River)*, 1951
oil on canvas
Collection of Sandra and Bram Dijkstra
Search for Rest (Nile River) is filled with many of Abercrombie’s favorite motifs: a cast of strange and mostly barren trees, Victorian furniture, a giraffe, a white church, and a wandering female figure. The river that snakes through this desolate landscape could serve as a source of hydration and sustenance for this weary traveler, but its ceaseless churn could also allude to the constancy of her journey. The chaise longue similarly seems to offer respite, but it is tipped precariously forward. The figure’s physical fatigue may allude to Abercrombie’s emotional exhaustion as she continued to grapple with her mental health, care for a young child, and attend to a new marriage, all while maintaining an active artistic practice and vibrant social life.

35 *A Picture in a Picture in a Picture*, 1955
oil on Masonite
Private collection
Abercrombie titled *A Picture in a Picture in a Picture* for a motif she regularly employed in her paint-

ings to join layers of reality and create provocative juxtapositions between them. Abercrombie attributed her use of this visual strategy to an American consumer product. “I got it from the Quaker Oats people,” she said. “The idea of a painting within a painting within a painting. . . there was always a picture of the man and then another picture of the man behind him, and then another one and another one, and so. . . I did it. I do it all the time.” In this instance, each image frame has a variation, from the open door to the portrait on the wall in the final and smallest image. It is implicitly uncanny, mixing a feeling of deep familiarity with a continued alienation.

36 *Untitled (Lady with Cat)*, 1961
oil on Masonite
Private collection

37 *Untitled (Lighthouse, Whale, and Black Sea)*, 1948
oil on canvas
Collection of Bernard Friedman, Courtesy of Lincoln Glenn Gallery, New York

38 *Tree of Life: Parts 1 & 2*, 1949–1950
oil on board
Private collection

39 *Cats, Screen, and Ghost*, 1950
oil on canvas
Illinois State Museum, Purchase

40 *Split Personality*, 1954
oil on Masonite
DePaul Art Museum, Art Acquisition
Endowment Fund

41 *Levitation*, 1967
oil on Masonite
Private collection, Illinois
Beginning in 1952, Abercrombie prominently featured the table at the center of *Levitation* in a number of works. These paintings foreground magic and sorcery, which had long been an undercurrent in her oeuvre. Here, a shadowy magician stands behind the table as an unconscious woman floats above it. Yet, even as she levitates, her hair and the hem of her dress graze the stone surface, slightly tethering her to the physical world—another instance of the artist joining planes of reality. Though it appears mysterious in this pared-down composition, the marble-topped table was another object that Abercrombie owned and from which she drew inspiration. As she said, “There is magic everywhere if you stop and look and listen.”

42 *Mysterious Stranger (Man, House, and Lady)*, 1953
oil on board
Courtesy of Karma Gallery
A bearded man dressed in black, his face in shadow, stands at the base of the path leading to a brick house. A woman peers at him through the window as her black cat stands like a sentinel on the grass. Is she watching him leave or eagerly awaiting his arrival? As in many of Abercrombie’s works, the plot of the depicted narrative is unresolved. Peculiar men—strangers, visitors, and magicians who resemble Abraham Lincoln—make regular appearances in Abercrombie’s paintings and may allude to the dangerous excitement of the unexpected or to her various romantic partners.

43 *The Countess Nerona*, ca. 1945
oil on Masonite
Private collection

Abercrombie depicted herself in a number of guises, including as the Countess Nerona. This persona was inspired by the antihero of a popular Wilkie Collins murder mystery *The Haunted Hotel*, originally published in 1878. The countess lounges on a Victorian sofa, a piece of furniture that Abercrombie owned and that befits the 19th-century character. Abercrombie may have been drawn to the inscrutable nature of the countess, who murdered her husband. She may also have been intrigued by the intertwined love stories explored in the novel, as she grappled with a turbulent marriage to her first husband, Robert Livingston.

44 *The Magician*, 1964
oil on linen
University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts at Illinois State University,
Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust

45 *Giraffe House*, 1954
oil on Masonite
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Bequest of Ruth S. Nath

46 *Horse, Owl, and Chaise*, 1966
oil on Masonite
Private collection, Illinois

Reading Salon

Gertrude Abercrombie was a fervent listener of jazz and organized regular jam sessions at her home. This playlist, assembled by writer John Corbett, combines the songs she loved with themes that are found in her work and life. Scan the QR code to listen on your device:



47 *Return to Living*, 1941
oil on canvas
Private collection

48 *Inheritance*, 1955
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Karma Gallery

49 *Indecision*, ca. 1948
oil on canvas
Sharp Museum, Southern Illinois University,
Carbondale

An Unstill Life

While Abercrombie was creating her enigmatic interiors and landscapes, she started to experiment with still lifes. She filled these compositions with stark arrangements of shells, eggs, dominoes, dice, and other subjects, but now without a sense of implied narrative. Abercrombie focused on replicating these items, which she owned and painted from life, in exacting detail. Most objects depicted are life-size, and the dimensions of many of her compositions are determined by those of her subjects. She also experimented with scale by producing miniature paintings, many of which were created to be worn as brooches. She rendered these tiny works meticulously, and they also portray recurrent subjects, among them grape compotes, dead trees, full moons, shells, jacks, and self-portraits.

Abercrombie additionally innovated by executing select still lifes in shadowboxes, positioning painted and actual objects alongside one another. This hyper-realistic style reveals her to be toying with the boundaries between physical and artistic worlds. While emphasizing the significance of each object through their intentional placement, Abercrombie's play between these two realities implicates the autobiographical nature of her paintings as parallel fantasies of real life.

50 *Shell and Drape*, 1952
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Karma Gallery

51 *Eggs and Dominoes*, 1954
oil on Masonite
Raduns-Silverstein Collection

52 *Night Stand*, 1964
oil on Masonite
Private collection, Illinois

53 *Switches*, 1952
oil on Masonite
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Gift
of Albert and Muriel Newman

54 *One of My Boxes (Eye, Leaf, and Shell Box)*, 1958
oil on board, wood, and shell
Private collection, Illinois

55 *Leaf, Ribbon, Domino, Dice, Shell, Pieces of Eight*, 1954
oil on Masonite
Courtesy of Karma Gallery

56 *Untitled (Telephone)*, 1958
oil on panel
The Arts Club of Chicago, Gift of Jean Nerenberg
in memory of her mother, Ruth Bloomberg, 2009

57 *Four Shells*, 1952
oil on Masonite
Private collection

58 *Shell*, 1954
oil on Masonite
Private collection, Boston

59 *Self-Portrait Brooch*, 1954
oil on board, set in wire mount
Illinois State Museum, Gift of the Gertrude
Abercrombie Trust

60 *Untitled*, no date
oil on Masonite, set in silver mount
Private collection

61 *Jack Piece*, 1950
oil on Masonite, set in mount
Courtesy of Karma Gallery

62 *Compote*, 1952
oil on panel
Collection of Bettina and Brian Barrow

63 *Moon, Owl & Tree*, ca. 1952
oil on board, set in silver mount
Private collection, Illinois

64 *Untitled*, no date
oil on board, set in silver and copper mount
Collection of Claire Vinson and Philip Williams

65 *Witches' Switches*, 1952
oil on Masonite
Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of the Gertrude
Abercrombie Trust

One of Abercrombie's dreams served as inspiration for *Witches' Switches*. As she described,

"I woke up one morning and this thing was in my head. It was of four switches, black, brown, kind of blonde, and half blonde. . . Right away, I got up and painted it. . . That's fun to have dreams about something and then you paint them. You don't have to sit and worry about it at all." By changing the color of each switch—artificial hair pieces that here assume a fetishistic quality—and the head of each pin, Abercrombie created a visual game that explores variation within repeated subjects and that alludes to her painted alter egos.

66 *My Second Best Box*, 1957
oil on board, found box, and objects
Illinois State Museum, Gift of the Gertrude
Abercrombie Trust

In 1957, Abercrombie wrote, "I'm doing some new inventions. Don't know if they're art or not but people say yes they are." A few weeks later, seemingly convinced that what she had made was indeed art, she reported on her "new invention" to friends, explaining that she had acquired shadowboxes to combine "all sorts of strange objects" with her paintings. In *My Second Best Box*, Abercrombie positioned a metal wishbone, key, ball, jack, and shell in the interior frame of a shadowbox, juxtaposing them with painted versions on the box's interior. The representations are near but not next to their three-dimensional counterparts, producing a trippy matching game in which the objective world and the painted world are conflated and shown to be equally real.

67 *The Dinosaur*, 1964
oil on panel
Collection of Zach and Elizabeth Nelson

68 *Birds Eggs and Dominoes with Pyramid*, 1963
oil on Masonite
Private collection

A semi-circular arrangement of bird eggs and dominoes dominates the foreground of this painting. It is one of a few works executed in the 1960s in which Abercrombie fused her landscape and still-life techniques, positioning exactly rendered objects in a dreamlike space. A stone pyramid stands erect on the horizon line against what at first appears to be a nocturnal sky illuminated by a crescent moon. But this shape does not represent a lunar phase, and upon closer inspection, a black circle has been painted over this celestial body. The scene is set in a solar eclipse, with the new moon passing over the sun. Day transforms into night.

A Door Is a Door

By 1955, Abercrombie introduced another new body of work, her *Demolition Doors* series. In each of these paintings, a row of at least three doors—independent of any building—stands erect on a sidewalk. She engaged playfully with color and pattern, immersing herself in the idea of difference within repetition.

This subject did not solely spring from Abercrombie's imagination. For these works, she found the fantastic in the real, basing her paintings on what she observed in her neighborhood: doors were being removed from buildings prior to demolition and assembled as walls around construction sites. In the 1950s, Hyde Park underwent one of the nation's largest urban renewal plans, spearheaded by the University of Chicago. Assisted by new federal, state, and local legislation designed to eliminate perceived urban "blight," the university sought to create a neighborhood that would be white and affluent, effectively displacing a Black population that grew as a result of the Great Migration. Given that Abercrombie had no tolerance for prejudice and had a nearly lifelong connection to her neighborhood, her *Demolition Doors* paintings cast light on the racist policies that were transforming her community.

69 *Doors, 4 and Cats, 1956*
oil on Masonite
Private collection

70 *Doors, 1960*
oil on Masonite
Private collection, Courtesy of Waqas Wajahat,
New York

71 *Doors, 4 and Cat, 1961*
oil on Masonite
Collection of David Bolger

72 *Doors, 4 (5 ½), 1957*
oil on board
Collection of Shio Kusaka and Jonas Wood

In her *Demolition Doors* paintings, Abercrombie employed a visually concise approach that emphasizes how rhythm perpetuates across her compositions. In addition to varying the number of doors and whether they fully extend across the surface or appear in the round, she adjusted their color; the number and configuration of their interior panels; their relative heights; and the presence, position, and tone of their knobs. Each work has a strange presence resulting from the mystery about where these doors might lead. Abercrombie was fascinated by the appearance of these doors in her environs, even though she lamented the changes to her neighborhood. As she wrote to friends, "Working on pictures of doors that they put up around all the demolition. . . It's so sad I can't even look. But the doors are gorgeous."

73 *Doors with Cat and Shell, 1957*
oil on Masonite
Private collection, Courtesy of Waqas Wajahat,
New York

74 *Doors 4 1/2+, 1957*
oil on board
Illinois State Museum, Gift of the Estate of
Leon Despres

75 *Doors, 1957*
oil on Masonite
Private collection, New York

76 *Demolition Doors, 1964*
oil on Masonite
Illinois State Museum, Purchase

77 *Untitled (Demolition Doors), 1958*
oil on Masonite
Private collection, Illinois

78 *Four Doors, 1957*
oil on Masonite
Collection of Nicolas Party

Waning Crescent

Abercrombie's health began to decline precipitously in 1959. By the mid-1960s, she was suffering not only physically, but also emotionally, financially, and artistically. Her long-standing depression and feelings of loneliness intensified as her once-vibrant social life diminished and her health compromised her ability to paint. Her output decreased dramatically, and she eventually ceased to paint. Nevertheless, Abercrombie continued to exhibit her paintings, culminating in the first retrospective of her work, held at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1977, shortly before her death.

Throughout her career, Abercrombie recycled subjects and incorporated memory into her paintings, implicating the passage of time. The ever-changing phases of the moon across her oeuvre illuminate this quality vividly. Her last works, paired here with resonant pieces from the late 1940s, are barren nighttime landscapes that reflect the artist's own nearing transition to the beyond.

79 *Stars and Crescent, 1948*
oil on Masonite
Illinois State Museum, Gift of the Estate of
Leon Despres

80 *The Door and the Rock, 1971*
oil on Masonite
Collection of Dr. Timothy Junio

Abercrombie composed a work befitting the end of her life with *The Door and the Rock*. The painting shows a large boulder jutting out of the ocean with a red door slightly before it and a white cloud above it. The door appears connected to a wall to its left, but that wall melds into a nocturnal sky, confusing atmosphere and structure. Similarly, the floor beneath the door morphs into water, and the cloud also seems as if it could be a snowy mountaintop. With this strange piece, one of her final works, Abercrombie left one more puzzle, a painted manifestation of her feeling that "the whole world is a mystery."

81 *Hand and Tent, 1949*
oil on Masonite
Collection of James Park, San Francisco

82 *Untitled (Tree at Aledo Variation), 1963*
oil on Masonite
Illinois State Museum, Gift of the Estate of
Maurine Campbell

83 *Wall with Moon (Doorway), 1969*
oil on board
Private collection

84 *Moored to the Moon, 1963*
oil on board
Private collection, New York

85 *Pink Moon & Tree, 1949*
oil on Masonite
Private collection

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