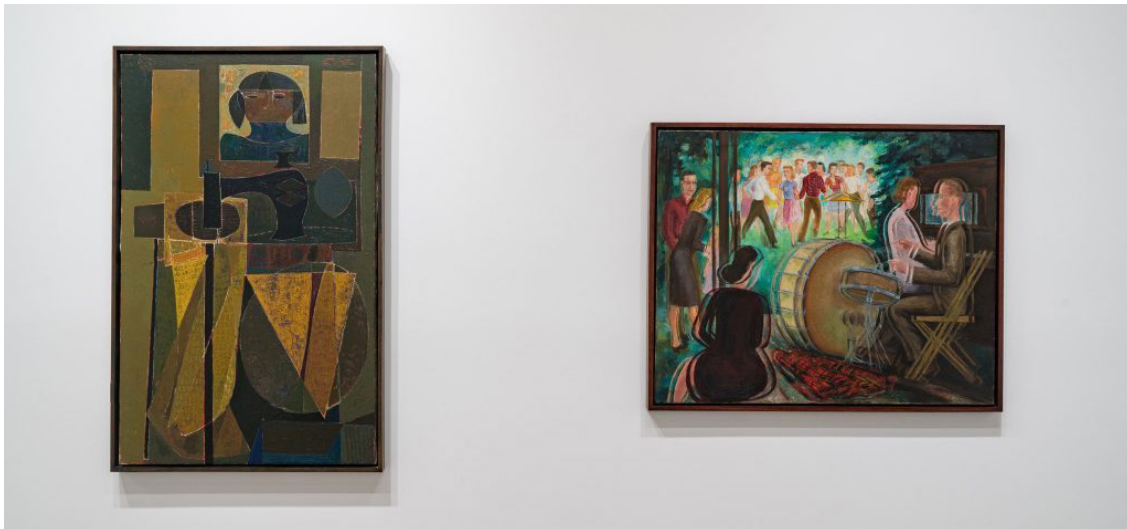


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Hypocrite Lector: A Review of “*Nuth’n to Hyde*” at Corbett vs. Dempsey

Charles Venkatesh Young | July 8, 2025



Installation view of “*Nuth’n to Hyde*”: *Gertrude Abercrombie and the Hyde Park Ethos, 1935-1975*, 2025, at Corbett vs. Dempsey/Photo: Bob.

Business is booming for the Chicago Imagists. Karl Wirsum, Suellen Rocca and (honorary member) Robert Lostutter have all recently received solo shows at major New York galleries, Christina Ramberg is coming off a major traveling retrospective, and it seems every hip collector has latched onto Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson. However, viewers expecting a victory lap from Corbett vs. Dempsey’s “*Nuth’n to Hyde*” will be sorely disappointed. There is none of the usual Imagist triumph over uninspired intellectualism and formalist conservatism. A tradition is outlined, and the Imagists are inscribed within it—they’re no doubt its most successful coterie, but the foundations of the populist, anti-aesthetic realm from which their work emerged fully-formed were established in Hyde Park long before their crusade began.

Having picked an impossible fight—displaying Imagist works while attempting to soften the originality which has rendered them ageless (not to mention red-hot commercially)—the gallery enlists a titan: Gertrude Abercrombie, fresh from her rollicking retrospective at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Art. No aesthetic line is drawn directly from Abercrombie and the Imagists, whose respective oeuvres are ships passing in the night. The profound stillness and interiority of Abercrombie’s canvases suggest she would’ve found the show’s trio of Imagists—Karl Wirsum, Jim Nutt and Jim Falconer—loudmouthed and superficial. (The opposite can be said of Christina Ramberg and Barbara Rossi, whose painstaking formal exploration of the female body proves touchingly congenial to Abercrombie’s deep dive into the female psyche.) The

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effect is startling nonetheless, not because the Imagists on view are proven to have taken inspiration from anything other than urban detritus and underground comix, but because their willingness to completely shun the intellectual seems to have been prefigured by Abercrombie's choice to do the exact opposite: her paintings appear positively repulsed by the external physical world which became the Imagists' muse.



Installation view of “Nuth’n to Hyde”: *Gertrude Abercrombie and the Hyde Park Ethos, 1935-1975, 2025*, at Corbett vs. Dempsey/Photo: Bob.

Abercrombie's three portraits on view—all foregrounding sullen, expressionless visages—are testaments to this repudiation, infusing the endless spatial depth of the European surrealists with her own flair for the bored quotidian mind. “Untitled”—a canvas massive by Abercrombie's diminutive standards—is at once masterfully disarming and juvenile (par for the course with Abercrombie at her best), depicting a slender bureaucrat in vivid tinges of blood red and navy blue which somehow only enhance his gloom. While the painting is an apt foil to Karl Wirsum's “Untitled (We Got Nuth’n to Hyde)” —which, like most of Wirsum's jagged temptresses, lacks all semblance of conscious thought or subjectivity—Abercrombie's probing eye proves transformative for the Jims, Nutt and Falconer, whose usual hedonism is peeled back to reveal a slight but world-rending poignancy.

Both Jims are represented by positive masterpieces. Nutt's “Thinking Back I...” apotheosizes his sexed-up, cilia-coated figures by positioning them in a literal theater—they resemble sperm in a Petri dish, at once jovial and urgent. Falconer's “Untitled,” comprising a brown-on-mustard-yellow print over a painterly rendering of some pixelated flowers, collapses its two visual vernaculars—those of underground punks and suburban housewives—into a single, plaintive compromise. Abercrombie's angst gives these works teeth: their febrile pulse is, for all its carefree appearance, shot through with the pathetic qualities of one who makes art to cope with their racing mind.

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Humble 1949 masterworks by Hyde Parkers Miyoko Ito and Harold Haydon bolster the central idea: the Imagists were as much a product of their artistic predecessors as their unprecedented historical moment. They did not bloom organically out of America's floundering conscience, but trod a road paved long before they thought about traversing it. And rather than blunting their pictorial novelty, this fact augments it, imbuing their self-indulgent aesthetic project with a pathos viewers are liable to drown out. Look carefully, and let the work speak for itself—it might say more than you've been told it's supposed to.