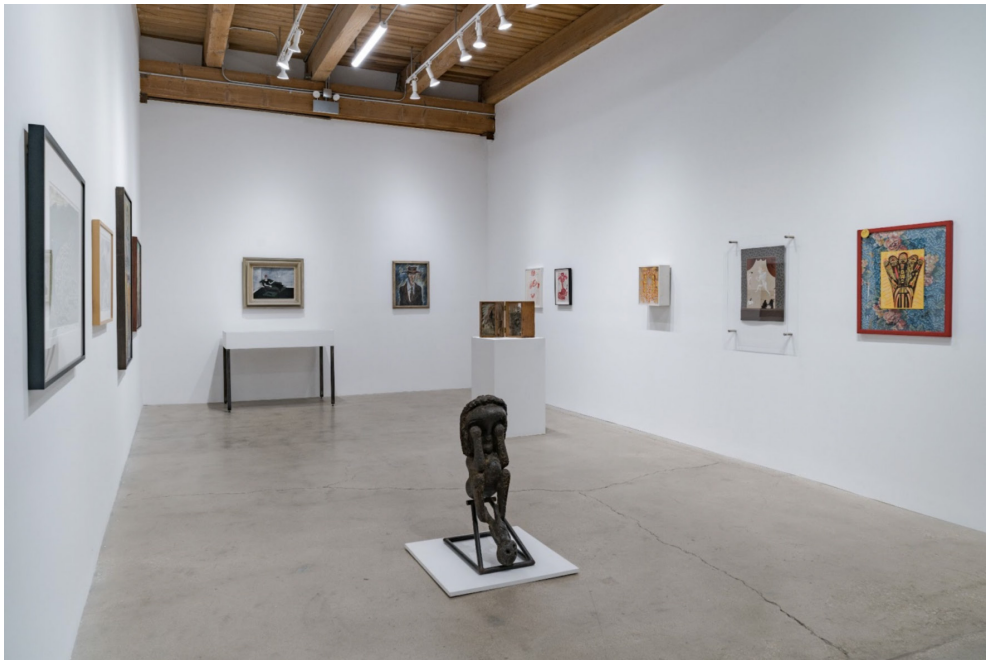
HYDE PARK HERALD

'Nuth'n to Hyde' at Corbett vs. Dempsey

by Joshua Wagner | July 29, 2025



An installation view of "Nuth'n to Hyde" at Corbett vs. Dempsey.

It's said that Gertrude Abercrombie's paintings once turned up more often in thrift stores than in museums. Today, in the back gallery of Corbett vs. Dempsey, her rarely-exhibited work anchors a new group show, "'Nuth'n to Hyde': Gertrude Abercrombie and the Hyde Park Ethos, 1935–1975."

Abercrombie the "jazz witch" was well-known in midcentury Hyde Park for her cats, bohemian lifestyle and salons that became hubs of interdisciplinary exchange. They were where she reportedly argued with Dizzy Gillespie about who invented bebop, debated surrealism over bourbon with Sarah Vaughan and, if legend is to be believed, made Charlie Parker's favorite painting, endearingly retitled "Charlie Parker's Favorite Painting."

"Everything is autobiographical in a sense but kind of dreamy," Abercrombie told Studs Terkel in 1977, and her paintings came right out of her life. Her charisma and surreal, psychologically resonant work modeled an open, collaborative spirit that would ripple through Hyde Park's art world for decades.

While a touring retrospective presents Abercrombie as a newly discovered tour-de-force, "Nuth'n to Hyde" reframes her as one artist among many in a longstanding creative ecology, much of it held together by neighborhood artist-curator-impresario Don Baum. The one-room exhibition includes 16

HYDE PARK HERALD

works — paintings, multimedia collage, prints and sculpture — from Chicago collections. Most are not Abercrombie's, but she functions as a connective thread, linking the divergent approaches of artists who built a set of practices around teaching and learning at the Hyde Park Art Center, the 57th Street Art Colony and the 57th Street Art Fair.

One defining piece in the exhibition is Abercrombie's "Figure on Green Couch (Countess Nerona)," which greets you from the far wall as you round the corner into the gallery. A thinly-painted woman reclines in solitude. She presides over the space as much as she haunts it. Like a Hopper canvas, the narrative has been excised, leaving only the trace of its passage. What violence here has rendered this woman solitary? The canvas dangles the possibility of resolution, while denying it entirely, making it hard to know what the viewer does not know.

Nearby, a painting by Jim Falconer, whose explosive abstraction—bursting with flowering forms and a floating fist—confronts the viewer with flurries of activities and layers of fluorescent paint, while a Harold Haydon piece sets out an idealized scene of a county square dance. In contrast to these internally complete creations, Abercrombie's works are like fragments of fairy tales, scenes from a storyteller who left the endings out.

In the background of the show is the transition of Hyde Park's artistic life from the waning Art Colony — given lifeforce after the 1893 World's Fair — to finding a home in the Renaissance Society and the Hyde Park Art Center, particularly under Baum's direction.

When Baum took over the Art Center in the late 1950s, he curated new work by a growing community of Chicago artists, developing a neighborhood ethos. Under Baum's tenure, the Art Center served as a space for study, exhibition and community education. It was also a launchpad for the Monster Roster, Non-Plussed Some and the Imagists. These artists — many of them veterans on the G.I. Bill — filtered war, psychoanalysis and city life into layered, psychological forms.

The history of Baum's Hyde Park Art Center suffuses the individual works in the show. It is difficult to look at Baum's Joseph Cornell-inspired diorama or Karl Wirsum's 57th Street Art Fair posters without thinking about the world they emerged from. Even Cosmo Campoli's sculpture "Birth of Death," a companion to his public work "Bird of Peace" still perched outside Nichols Park Field House, is inseparable from the community that supported his art.

All of these artists were working within a larger creative scene, making art for the local community. Outside of the Art Center, these same artists were selling their work in the 57th Street Art Fair and the Renaissance Society's Young Collector's shows, where new works could be purchased for $50 or less.

But there are artistic similarities that justify this history-in-snapshots, too. Baum's jolting mixed-media portraits, Falconer's buoyant serigraphs and Abercrombie's moody self-portraits share a fascination with opening up what paint can do, and how it can mess with the viewer's expectations.

HYDE PARK HERALD

The natural surprise of the world is characteristic of Abercrombie's perspicacious mind. "I never did sit and think about what to paint," Abercrombie told Terkel, as she was losing the physical ability to paint. "It's just, I have a million in me right now."

A side gallery, the McPhee, features Abercrombie's album cover designs for Orlando, a Chicago singer and harpist who co-wrote "For Once in My Life," which became a Stevie Wonder hit. Whether in the music Abercrombie inspired or the artists who followed, the show reveals the Hyde Park Art Center's legacy as a place where creativity was always communal, always evolving.

Under Baum, the Art Center became an institutional salon — a place for collaboration and excess over competition and fame. Falconer (whose piece still bears its original price tag), Jim Nutt and Miyoko Ito developed their visual vocabularies in a hyperlocal, university-inflected art scene.

Standing before Nutt's bug-eyed portraits or Baum's unruly collages, you can trace a lineage from Abercrombie's salons to the Imagists' group energy. Both were responses to the same need: to make work that reflected a nearby world, not an art market.

And sometimes, that need surpassed the artist's own capability, reaching for what was as-yet unmade and unexpressible. In Abercrombie's own words from the Terkel interview, "when you're a good painter, you know how to put the paint on just where you want it and sometimes mine fails miserably but I can think up the ideas. The art has to do with ideas here.

Baum's legacy — and the Hyde Park Art Center's — isn't captured by any one artist or movement. It lives in the gaps: in the overlapping circles, the conversations and the creative frissons. That spirit still animates the gallery today.