

Exhibition Review of “*A Home for Surrealism: Fantastic Painting
in Midcentury Chicago*”
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Between 1929 and the 1950s, the Arts Club of Chicago—an institution founded in the aftermath of the Armory Show to advance the most sophisticated paradigms of contemporary art—developed a reputation for exhibiting artists working at the forefront of the surrealist movement in Paris as well as those representing its transatlantic postwar legacy: artists like Man Ray, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, André Masson, Wilfredo Lam, Enrico Donati, and Kurt Seligmann, followed by representatives of Abstract Expressionism, art brut, and Informel. Situated in this distinguished context, it is startling to see paintings by a group of largely lesser-known artists of this same period in the exhibition “A Home for Surrealism: Fantastic Painting in Midcentury Chicago.” Curator Janine Mileaf seized upon the occasion of the Terra Foundation of Art’s sweeping city-wide initiative, Art Design Chicago, to identify a group of painters working more or less independently of the Paris surrealist group and, for the most part, each other. The artists—Gertrude Abercrombie, Ivan Albright, Eldzier Cortor, Julio de Diego, Harold Noecker, Dorothea Tanning, Julia Thecla, and John Wilde—developed what Mileaf identifies as a “domestic version of Surrealism” particular to the orbit of Chicago, informed as much by the legacy of the Arts Club’s exhibitions and ample Chicago collections of surrealist art as by the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933 and 1934.

This landmark of modernism in Chicago is now filled with so many precisely rendered fantastic landscapes; claustrophobic, psychologically coded interiors; a *mise en abyme* of pictures within pictures; and a menagerie of symbolically resonant household pets. Mileaf underscores the intentionality of this juxtaposition by unfolding the exhibition around a turned wood mantle evoking the vernacular interior decor of nineteenth-century Chicago, which any native Chicagoan will recognize as an “original detail” still common in local dwellings. Camouflaged in a

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monochrome coat of paint making it continuous with the wall, the mantle functions as an apparition of homely domesticity beneath a hovering group of the exhibition's smaller paintings hung salon-style. Situated in view of a significant artifact of architectural modernism in Chicago—the elegant steel staircase with a travertine marble surround designed by Mies van der Rohe in 1951 and salvaged as the central feature of the building when the Club moved to its present location in 1997—the anachronism of the display crystallizes what is most striking about Mileaf's curatorial strategy.¹ The juxtaposition of these interior features—each representing divergent genres of interior space at midcentury—appears to propose an alternative timeline of the exhibition history of the Arts Club of Chicago. In assembling an underappreciated cross section of artists, a loose grouping united by overlapping social circles and shared exhibitions or formation, as if it were a contemporary group show, she essentially recasts the Arts Club's defining role in the history of the reception of Surrealism in Chicago as it might have been.

Transforming the gallery into a domestic salon, the mantle manifests the double sense of “home” implied by the title of the exhibition. Most overtly it represents the domestic iconography that proves the strongest link between these artists, but it also stands for the place where they made their home, the city and its institutions, as a kind of hearth around which to gather. This latter definition of home, and the indefinite article added to it, “a home,” offers a promising paradigm by which to consider artists working outside of the dominant geographic centers of the art world or without a specific coterie, yet with distinct and describable ties to a place and time. It makes inroads into the growing interest around the pluralization of Surrealisms beyond those historically designated by André Breton and Georges Bataille, and finds international iterations of the movement precisely by focusing on the local while embracing a wider, more intuitive definition of Surrealism than those outlined in the key texts of the French group.² Along these lines, the diminutive size of the paintings surrounding the mantle makes minoriness into an organizing theme of the show. The smallest painting in the exhibition—Abercrombie's *Untitled (Cat and Kittens)* of 1952, from the collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis—measures a mere 1 ³/₄ by 2 ¹/₈ inches. Alongside the playful scale shifts appearing in several of the canvases, the embrace of the small format not only by Abercrombie but also by Cortor, Wilde, Thecla, and Tanning, makes minoriness visible as a deliberate tactic for many of these artists. At a moment characterized by the growing domination of New York as the center of the art world, this embrace of one's marginality becomes visible as a tactic deployed with intention and consequence, transforming the way we might consider the choice of Chicago as a locale for situating an artistic practice and an insistence on figuration after the ascendancy of abstraction as the dominant form of advanced painting.

Mileaf has expressed hope that this exhibition and the research behind it might spark further research.³ And indeed, starting from the exhibition's departure

from dominant definitions of Surrealism in order to uncover an underexplored model of the movement domestic to Chicago, potential avenues for new inquiries multiply. The exhibition catalogue, edited by Mileaf alongside Susan F. Rossen and published by the University of Chicago Press, is a strong contribution to this field, including essays by Mileaf, Robert Cozzolino, Adam Jolles, Joanna Pawlik, with artist biographies and a bibliography by Marin Sarvé-Tarr. Cozzolino mobilizes his depth of experience in exploring the lesser-known artists of the American Midwest to ask what made Chicago unique as a locus of surrealist art-making, from the particular influence of the Field Museum, the Institute for Psychoanalysis, and the city's stark social-geographic disparities to the robust presence of work by Joseph Cornell in Chicago collections. Mileaf sets these practices apart from mainstream midcentury domestic consumerism by situating them in relation to the concerns of French Surrealism, such as the concept of the uncanny as it plays out in works by Abercrombie and Albright. Pawlik reveals the way in which Surrealism gave Abercrombie and Tanning tactics to move beyond normative notions of domesticity and sexual identity. Finally, Jolles traces the history of the exhibition and collection of surrealist art in Chicago, which laid the groundwork for the practices on view in the exhibition.

While the thematic focus of the exhibition frees some of these artists from the categories of gender or racial identity through which their work has frequently been understood, the rubric of Surrealism might nonetheless threaten the specificity of their politics, a liability that certain essays in the catalogue work strongly to address, particularly in relation to Cortor and Abercrombie. Cortor's painting practice, for instance, came out of his regionalist works for the Works Progress Administration, which funded his depiction of social themes on Chicago's South Side and in the Gullah community in South Carolina. His work, then, portrays the surrealist idiom almost by accident, as a way to effectively communicate the extreme living conditions of his subjects. On the other hand, the exhibition's embrace of aesthetic strategies outside the dominant artistic currents of the era might underplay the way in which the artists featured in this exhibition appear to have engaged with the most novel art forms at the heart of the "center," despite their persistence at the periphery. The way in which some of these artists incorporate abstraction—as in the meticulously painted abstract wing forms of Tanning, the idiosyncratic directional brushwork of Abercrombie, the biomorphism of de Diego, the scumbling in Cortor's backgrounds, and the incorporation of chance operations by Thecla—makes their commitment to the surrealist idiom appear all the more conscientious.

It is a mark of this exhibition's strength that it produces a desire for elaboration and expansion, not only in terms of the career of each artist represented, but also in terms of medium and chronology. How, for example, would this grouping have been complicated or transformed by the inclusion of other mediums beyond painting, fleshing out the intriguing suggestion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that

emerges from the interplay of art and domestic life? Included prints by Tanning and de Diego, both of which display a surprising level of painterly abstraction, provide compelling examples of the potential of this approach. What new genealogies and unexpected trajectories might be spun from this exhibition as a point of origin? Tanning's soft sculpture pieces of the late 1960s and early 1970s would be particularly interesting to see in relation to this earlier work, and would valuably expand the well-known continuity of art and design in Surrealism as it has been conventionally understood with the more transgressive concepts of domesticity and space at issue in this show. The exploration of this delimited moment of largely independent work in the surrealist mode might also offer valuable context for the Chicago Surrealist Group, which formed out of the political ferment in the mid-1960s with a more formal relation to the still-active French movement. The anti-institutional stance of the young poets and artists in this group led them to curate their own work alongside a roster of international surrealist artists in alternative, DIY spaces; the less traditional formats of their work would make for a compelling contrast to the work seen here, proving how capacious and contested a category Surrealism has been.

1 For more on the significance of this staircase to the history of the Club, see Thomas Dyja, "The Arts Club of Chicago: Modernism in the Making," in *The Arts Club of Chicago at 100: Art and Culture, 1916–2016*, eds. Janine Mileaf and Susan F. Rossen (Chicago: The Arts Club of Chicago and University of Chicago Press, 2016), 8-17.

2 To understand some of these artists in relation to the site of their practice runs counter to the ways in which they have been interpreted in the past. In relation to Abercrombie, for example, on the occasion of her 1977 exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center, Wendell Wilcox wrote: "The resemblance of her work to that of some of the surrealists is an accident purely of time and place. Her pictures could not have been much different had they been born into another world. ... At any time in history or any place in the world she would have painted only herself and her possessions." Wendell Wilcox, *Gertrude Abercrombie: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Hyde Park Art Center, 1977), n.p.

3 Janine Mileaf, "Introduction," in *A Home for Surrealism: Fantastic Painting in Midcentury Chicago*, eds. Janine Mileaf and Susan F. Rossen (Chicago: The Arts Club of Chicago and University of Chicago Press, 2018), 15.