BERENICE ABBOTT
(1898-1991), PHOTOGRAPHS
21/02 – 29/04/2012

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BERENICE ABBOTT
(1898-1991), PHOTOGRAPHS
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CURATOR
Gaëlle Morel, Curator at the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto.

PARTNERS
Exhibition organised by Jeu de Paume, Paris
co-produced with the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto.

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A Nous, arte, de l’air, Stiletto, Fip

Special thanks to Renaissance Paris Vendôme Hôtel.
After Lee Miller, Lisette Model, Diane Arbus – and before Eva Besnyö – Jeu de Paume is continuing its series of shows spotlighting women photographers of the twentieth century. With Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), urban experience is at the heart of the exhibition: in an America shaken by the Wall Street Crash, her images of 1930s New York convey her fascination with an urban landscape in the throes of dramatic change. Also known for championing the work of Eugène Atget, Abbott, who originally wanted to be sculptor, proved to be a great photographer of matter, space and light.

This is the first exhibition in France to cover every stage of Berenice Abbott’s career, featuring over 140 vintage prints by this American photographer as well as a series of documents never previously shown. The selection of portraits, architectural photographs and scientific plates shows the many facets of a body of work all too often reduced to a handful of familiar images.

In Abbott’s lifelong practice of photography, three distinct periods and places stand out. PARIS. She came to the French capital in the 1920s and was trained by Man Ray before opening her own studio, where she began a successful career as a portrait photographer. Mixing in the artistic and intellectual circles of the day, she photographed a cosmopolitan cast including Eugène Atget, Marcel Duchamp, James Joyce, Man Ray, Jean Cocteau, Sylvia Beach, André Gide, Foujita, Max Ernst, and Marie Laurencin.

NEW YORK. The exhibition also features a substantial selection of images from her Changing New York project (1935-1939), for which she is best known. This undertaking was Abbott’s own initiative but was financed by the Works Progress Administration, part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal efforts to combat the Great Depression. Conceived as both a record of the city and a work of art in its own right, this ambitious government commission focuses on the contrast between the old and the new in the rapidly changing City.

MIT. In the 1950s, Abbott produced a set of photographs illustrating the principles of mechanics and optics for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Combining aesthetic and educational concerns, these abstract, experimental images echo her photograms of the 1920s.

An active participant in the avant-garde circles in the 1920s, a determined opponent of Pictorialism and the school of Alfred Stieglitz, famous for bringing Eugène Atget to international attention, Berenice Abbott spent her whole career exploring the notions of documentary photography and photographic realism. This retrospective at Jeu de Paume brings out the richness of her approach, and both the diversity and unity of her work.
“The photographer must work to bring out the best possible expression of the model, but without sacrificing its identity.”

Berenice Abbott moved to New York in the early 1920s after giving up her journalism course at the University of Ohio. There she went about becoming a sculptor and mixed in the bohemian circles of Greenwich Village, meeting writers and artists, such as Djuna Barnes, Sadakichi Hartmann and Marcel Duchamp. She also posed for Man Ray. Economic hardship at home and the allure of what was then the cultural Eldorado of Europe impelled many of these artists to try their luck over the Atlantic, and Abbott herself joined the group of American expatriates in 1921.

In 1923 she became the assistant of Man Ray, who had opened a portrait studio shortly after his arrival in France, also in 1921. While a fair proportion of the studio’s clients were American tourists, Abbott found herself at the heart of the avant-garde scene, and especially the Surrealists. Between 1923 and 1926 she thus learnt about the process of print making and portrait photography while at the same time picking up a broader intellectual and artistic education.

She produced her portraits in Man Ray’s studio before opening her own in 1926. Success soon followed. Her clientele was a mixture of French cultural figures and American expatriates, of bourgeois and bohemians. Marie Laurencin, Jean Cocteau, James Joyce, Henri Barbusse, Paul Morand and André Gide all posed for portraits, which were on occasion manifestly influenced by Surrealism, usually in their interest for masquerade, play and disguise, but sometimes even in their use of overprinting and distortion. Her female models express a kind of sexual ambiguity, whether by their masculine haircut or clothes, or in suggestive poses that overtly convey an uncertainty about identity. In composing her portraits, Abbott developed a distinctive aesthetic, far removed from the usual commercial conventions. The absence of a set, with the background usually no more than a plain wall, helped to focus on the sitter and their posture, the position of their body and their facial expression. The use of a tripod and long-focus lenses placed at eye-height allowed her to avoid distortion and thus heighten the physical presence of the models.

Abbott’s photographs were published regularly in magazines, such as The Little Review, Vogue and Vu throughout the 1920s, but she also had exhibitions, notably at the Sacre du Printemps gallery in June 1926, and at the first salon of independent photographers at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées in 1928 (the event was a veritable manifesto against Pictorialism). She left Paris for New York in early 1929. Back in America she continued with the same activities, opening a new portrait studio and taking part in exhibitions of modernist photography, while also promoting the work of Eugène Atget, having bought part of the contents of his studio in 1928.
ARCHITECTURE

“The tempo of the city is not that of eternity, nor that of time, but that of the ephemeral. That is why recording it is so important, in both documentary and artistic terms.”

“All the photographs of New York took a long time to make, because the camera had to be carefully positioned. There is nothing fortuitous about these photographs.”

The exhibition features a substantial collection from Abbott’s best known project, Changing New York (1935–39). Commissioned by the Roosevelt Administration as part of its response to the nationwide economic crisis, Abbott saw this piece of work as both a way of documenting the City and as a personal work of art. Eighty of the 305 photographs taken by Abbott are on show here, along with various documents providing insight into the background of this major photographic undertaking, including posters and views of the exhibition organised by the Museum of the City of New York in 1937, sketches and historical notes made by the team of journalists working with Abbott on the project, and proofs and dummies of the layout made by the photographer before she started work.

Abbott homes in on the contrasts between old and new elements in the City’s structure. Her images alternate between a New Vision aesthetic, characterised by an emphasis on details and bold perspectives, and a more documentary style that is frontal and neutral. Rather than the kind of nostalgic approach often brought to bear on a city’s landmarks and typical sites, this ensemble offers an exploration of the nature of modernity and focuses on the ways in which the past and future are temporarily linked together. Seeking to reinvent the forms and functions of photography in relation to the practice of documentary, Abbott sets out to capture the “disappearance of the moment” by juxtaposing motifs from a city subject to an unprecedented process of demolition and reconstruction.

In 1938, hoping to take advantage of the fifty million visitors expected at the New York World’s Fair of 1939, the publisher, E.P. Dutton, offered to bring out a selection of one hundred images from the project accompanied by a text by the renowned art critic Elizabeth McCausland, who also happened to be Abbott’s companion and staunch supporter. Going against the women’s original ideas for an art book, Dutton produced a more standard tourist guide, breaking the City down into a series of tours, from south to north and from the centre outwards. The text, too, was shorn of its poetic and pedagogical dimensions, leaving only informative entries about the buildings in the pictures.

In the exhibition, this set of architectural photographs is rounded out by a selection of pictures of vernacular architecture taken by Abbott during a journey in the southern states of the US in the 1930s and when she was travelling along Route 1 in the 1950s. Here, portraits of farmers and wooden houses alternate with pictures of streets and local events.
SCIENCE

“My idea was to make a rayograph in motion. [...] I wanted them to be beautiful, but also accurate from a scientific viewpoint.”

Berenice Abbott took her first photographs of scientific experiments in 1939. In 1944 she was recruited by the journal Science Illustrated, where she published some of her own pictures, as head of its photography department. Abbott took a committed, pedagogical approach, seeing her images as vital bridges between modern science and the general public.

In 1957, as a result of the anxiety about national science stirred by the Soviet launch of the Sputnik into outer space, at the height of the Cold War, the National Science Foundation set up a Physical Science Study Committee (PSSC) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). One of its roles was to develop new textbooks for science teaching in schools so as to interest young people in science and thus encourage the formation of a corps of scientists and engineers capable of competing with the Soviets. To this end, the PSSC wanted to use innovative photographs to illustrate the principles of quantum mechanics in school books.

Abbott was hired by MIT to produce photographs for the popularisation and teaching of the sciences. Using abstract forms to visually express complex mechanical concepts and invisible mechanical laws, she also used black grounds to reveal principles such as gravity and light waves.

The exhibition features a score of Abbott’s scientific and experimental images, as well as some of the books for which they were used. Harking back to the experiments of the avant-gardes, and in particular the rayograph technique, she was able to produce visually attractive and surprising images that were also rich in discovery, thus combining documentary information with a sense of wonder.
Berenice Abbott (1898-1991)

1898  Birth of Berenice Abbott on 17 July in Springfield, Ohio.
1917  Planning to become a journalist, she studies at Ohio State University but stops after a few months.
1918  She leaves for New York City and gets in with the artistic circles of Greenwich Village (Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp). She starts making sculpture.
1921  Sails to Europe. Studies sculpture in Paris and Berlin and frequents the avant-garde, especially the Surrealists.
1923  Taken on by Man Ray as a trainee and assistant in his flourishing portrait studio in Montparnasse, Abbott does the developing and printing in the dark room, but also starts making her own portraits.
1926  Opens her own studio. Photographs the bourgeoisie and artistic and intellectual bohemia, including exiles (Jean Cocteau, James Joyce).
       Has her first exhibition at the Au Sacre du Printemps gallery. Comes to the notice of art critics, such as George Charensol and Florent Fels of the journal L’Art vivant.
       Through Man Ray she meets Eugène Atget, and buys several of his prints.
1928  After months of negotiation, she buys several thousand of Atget’s prints and negative plates from André Calmettes, executor of the estate of the photographer, who died the year before.
       Takes part in the Salon de l’Escalier exhibition at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, the first independent photography salon, alongside Man Ray, André Kertész and Germaine Krull. The exhibition is a manifesto against pictorialism and includes Atget prints loaned by Abbott.
1929  Takes part in the German modernist exhibitions Fotografie der Gegenwart (Essen) and Film und Foto (Stuttgart), both manifestos for experimental photography, marking the apotheosis of the New Vision. Atget is also represented in the form of prints loaned by Abbott.
       Returns to New York City, taking with her the Atget negative plates and prints, which she starts to promote. Opens a portrait studio, which is a commercial failure. Starts photographing the City and putting the photographs together in albums. These represent a wide variety of subjects and viewpoints.
1930  Exhibits a few of her prints alongside Atget’s photographs, which are being shown for the first time in New York City at the Weyhe Gallery. Publication in Paris and New York of the book Atget photographe de Paris with a preface by Pierre Mac Orlan.
Under pressure from financial difficulties, Abbott signs a contract with the Julien Levy Gallery for the commercial exploitation of the Atget Collection.
Takes part in the photography exhibition organised at Harvard University by Lincoln Kirstein, the first American show to champion a young generation of American documentary photographers (Walker Evans, Ralph Steiner), breaking with tradition and also with Alfred Stieglitz’s circle. Thanks to Abbott, a large number of images by Atget are also shown.

1931
Starts to approach – without success – various institutions to finance a major photographic survey of the City of New York (Guggenheim Foundation, Museum of the City of New York, New York Historical Society).

1932
Several solo and group exhibitions: *Photographs by Berenice Abbott*, *Photographs of New York by New York Photographers* and *Exhibition of Portrait Photography* at the Julien Levy Gallery. Her work is also shown in *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* organised at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) by Lincoln Kirstein, with Levy curating the photography section.

1934-35
Travels around the cities of the East Coast (Boston, New York, Philadelphia) with the architectural historian Henry Russell Hitchcock photographing Victorian architecture and, particularly, buildings by Henry Hobson Richardson. Exhibitions: *American Cities Before the Civil War* (Yale University) and *The Architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson and His Times* (MoMA).

1934
Exhibits her photographs of New York at the Museum of the City of New York in the hope of finding a patron for her project to record the city’s architectural and urban transformations.

1935
The *Changing New York* project finally receives support from the Federal Art Project, an art support scheme set up by the government through its Works Progress Administration. Abbott is the only photographer involved in this massive undertaking to document the American metropolis, which will continue into 1939. The use of a view camera enables her to achieve very clear, detailed and precise images. In all, Abbott produces over 300 negatives, which are accompanied by extensive documentation produced by the team of researchers enrolled in the same programme.

This year also witnesses the beginning of the photography campaign by the Farm Security Administration (1935-1942), the aim of which is to make Congress and the general public aware of the problems affecting small farmers as a result of the economic crisis (Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee).

1935-58
Teaches photography at the New School of Social Research.

1937
A selection of images from *Changing New York* is successfully exhibited at the Museum of the City of New York.

1939
Publication of the book *Changing New York*. Hoping to take advantage of the millions of visitors expected for the world’s fair in New York City, the publisher puts it
out in the form of a travel guide, whereas Abbott and the art critic Elizabeth McCausland wanted it to take the form of an art book.

1941   Publication of her Guide to Better Photography, a manual aimed at the sizeable market of amateur photographers.

1944-45   Creative director of the periodical Science Illustrated, in which she publishes large numbers of scientific images. One of her inventions is the Super Sight process, a direct photography system using 40 x 50 cm negatives.

1954   Travels along Route 1 to photograph cities from Maine to Florida.

1958-61   Hired by the Physical Science Study Committee of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a team of researchers mandated to supervise and improve the teaching of science in American schools. Abbott’s photographs illustrating the physical principles of light, speed and magnetism are reproduced in several school textbooks.

1960   Touring exhibition, Image of Physics, organised by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

1964   Publication of three books: The World of Atget, Magnet and Motion.

1968   The Museum of Modern Art acquires the Atget Collection held by Abbott and Levy. This is the biggest outlay by the museum’s photography department in its history.


BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS BY BERENICE ABBOTT

BOOKS ABOUT BERENICE ABBOTT

GENERAL BOOKS
AROUND THE EXHIBITION

CATALOGUE

Co-publication Hazan/Jeu de Paume/Ryerson Image Centre.

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Texts by Sarah Miller, Gaëlle Morel, Terri Weissman.

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TOURING

The exhibition will be shown
in France, at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, February 21 – April 29, 2012
in Canada, by the Ryerson Image Centre, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, from May 23 to August 19, 2012, in collaboration with Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival and the support of Ryerson University and the Ontario Arts Council.

GUIDED TOURS

Tuesday 28 February, 6pm
• “mardis jeunés”: young visitors’ day: tour of the exhibitions Ai Weiwei: Interlacing and Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), photographs by a Jeu de Paume staff guide.

Tuesday 24 April, 6pm
• “mardis jeunés”: young visitor’s day: tour of the exhibition Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), photographs by Gaëlle Morel, curator of the exhibition.
TALK AND SYMPOSIUM

Friday 30 March, 6pm
Both Berenice Abbott and Ai Weiwei pinpoint the architectural and urban evolutions of their respective periods, emphasising the notions of citizenship and community. Jean-Luc Nancy will examine the way these two artists treat such themes and will, in particular, question the way their images function as artworks in relation to their sociological concerns.

Saturday 21 April, 2.30pm
Symposium related to the exhibition Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), photographs with Gaëlle Morel, Curator of the exhibition; Emmanuelle de l’Ecotais, Curator at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Frits Gierstberg, Exhibitions Coordinator at the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam; Ron Kurtz, Director of Commerce Graphics; Françoise Reynaud, Curator of the Photography Collections at the Musée Carnavalet and Terri Weissman, Professor of Art History at the University of Illinois.
This international symposium will bring together Berenice Abbott specialists (researchers and curators) to study the phases of her career and the multiple facets of her work.
The images can be used by the press free of rights exclusively for the promotion of the exhibition Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), photographs at Jeu de Paume, from 21/02 to 29/04/2012.

BA01
Man Ray, Portrait of Berenice Abbott, 1925
Gelatin silver print, 22 x 14.5 cm
Collection Hank O’Neal, New York
© Man Ray Trust / ADAGP Paris 2011

BA02
Berenice Abbott, Self-Portrait, distortion, 1945
Gelatin silver print, 24 x 19 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA03
Berenice Abbott, Portrait of James Joyce with an eye patch, 1926
Gelatin silver print
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.
BA04
Berenice Abbott, Nightview, New York City, 1932
Gelatin silver print, 90 x 72 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA05
Berenice Abbott, New York Stock Exchange, New York City, 1933
Gelatin silver print, 24 x 19 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA06
Berenice Abbott, Treasury Building, New York City, 1933
Gelatin silver print, 51 x 40.5 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA07
Berenice Abbott, Photomontage, New York City, 1932
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 20 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.
BA08
Berenice Abbott, Miner, Greenview, West Virginia, 1935
Gelatin silver print, 25 x 19 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA09
Berenice Abbott, Happy’s Refreshment Stand, Daytona Beach, Florida, 1954
Gelatin silver print, 29.5 x 28 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA10
Berenice Abbott, Sunoco Station, Trenton, New Jersey, 1954
Gelatin silver print, 19 x 24.5 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA11
Berenice Abbott, Gasoline Station, Tremont Avenue and Dock Street, Bronx, July 2, 1936
Gelatin silver print, 24.5 x 19 cm
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.
BA12
Berenice Abbott, Blossom Restaurant, 103 Bowery, New York City, October 24, 1935, Gelatin silver print, 19 x 24.5 cm
Museum of the City of New York. Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA13
Berenice Abbott, Park Avenue and 39th Street, New York City, October 8, 1936
Gelatin silver print, 19 x 24.5 cm
Museum of the City of New York. Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA14
Berenice Abbott, Gunsmith and Police Department Headquarters, 6 Centre Market Place and 240 Centre Street, New York City, February 4, 1937
Gelatin silver print, 19 x 24.5 cm
Museum of the City of New York. Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA15
Berenice Abbott, Broadway to the Battery, New York City, May 4, 1938
Gelatin silver print, 17.5 x 24 cm
Museum of the City of New York. Museum Purchase with funds from the Mrs. Elon Hooker Acquisition Fund
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.
BA16
Berenice Abbott, Jean Cocteau with Gun, 1926
Gelatin silver print, 35.5 x 28 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA17
Berenice Abbott, Flat Iron Building, Broadway and Fifth Avenue, New York City, 1938
Gelatin silver print, 101.5 x 76 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA18
Berenice Abbott, Triborough Bridge, East 125th Street Approach, New York City, June 29, 1937
Gelatin silver print, 24.5 x 19 cm
Museum of the City of New York. Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA19
Berenice Abbott, Interference pattern, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Print mounted on masonite, 50 x 61 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.
BA20
Berenice Abbott, Bouncing Ball Time Exposure, 1958-1961
Print mounted on masonite, 58.5 x 51.5 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA21
Berenice Abbott, Wave pattern with glass plate, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958-1961
Gelatin silver print mounted on masonite, 24 x 21 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA22
Berenice Abbott, Light bulbs, Edison labs, c. 1940
Gelatin silver print, 21.5 x 30.5 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.

BA23
Berenice Abbott, Spinning wrench, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958-1961
Gelatin silver print mounted on masonite, 14 x 56 cm
Ronald Kurtz / Commerce Graphics
© Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics Ltd, Inc.
**INFORMATION**

**JEU DE PAUME**

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**CONTACTS**

Press relations: Carole Brianchon
+33 (0)1 47 03 13 22 / carolebrianchon@jeudepaume.org

Communication: Anne Racine
+33 (0)1 47 03 13 29 / anneracine@jeudepaume.org