Berenice Abbott Photos Evoke City of the 30's: Berenice Abbott Evokes City of 30's
By JOHN RUSSELL
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WITH every year that passes, Berenice Abbott looks more and more like what she is — one of the great irreducible Americans and one who will be remembered as long as there is anyone around who wants to know what America stood for and what manner of people Americans were. In her freedom of speech, thought and behavior, in her refusal to compromise and in her determination to go her own way, Berenice Abbott was recognized as an archetypal American from the moment that she first presented herself in Paris as a fledgling photographer.

We can see this demonstrated both in her show at the Witkin Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, which runs through Jan. 15, and in a new book called "Berenice Abbott: American Photographer" by Hank O'Neal, which has just been published by McGraw-Hill at $59.95. Her particular downright turn of mind shines out in everything that she has done, whether it is a portrait of James Joyce or Jean Cocteau in the Paris of the 1920's, a New York scene in the 1930's or one of the scientific subjects that she photographed between 1939 and 1961. Already in 1926, Jean Cocteau said in his foreword to her first exhibition in Paris that her art was one in which a chess game was played out between light and shadow. And that is

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true not simply in terms of the physical image that came out of the darkroom but also of the clarity, the lucidity and the self-evident rightness of all that she did.

To a New Yorker, it may well be the photographs of the period from 1929 to 1939 that speak most clearly and directly. Berenice Abbott in those years was not simply a photographer of New York — she had an important and peregrinatory collaboration, for instance, with Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the architectural historian — but in New York she found an inexhaustible source of subject matter. As she says in "Berenice Abbott: American Photographer," it was not just that New York was full of "good subjects," but that it was full of good subjects that lent themselves to photography.

They were of every imaginable kind. There were scenes of metropolitan magnificence. There were places ennobled by the past. There were new buildings whose daring still had the power to astonish. And all over the city there were disinherited areas, patches of dead ground, sculptures mysteriously laid flat on the ground, groups of men and women engaged in cryptic activities and buildings that seemed to have shot up too fast and too high for their own good. Berenice Abbott stalked them all.

She knew that, then as always, New York was in transition. She went around looking for the little movie houses whose day was almost done, the hardware stores that had every imaginable kind of household gadget in the window and the walkway along the Manhattan Bridge where she had to "use maximum swings and fairly fast shutter speed because of the vibration of the bridge." The waterfront at that time was still vital to the life of the city, and so was the elevated railway that gave her some memorable subjects and the Automat and the great old Pennsylvania Station.

Berenice Abbott did not photograph these things because they were photogenic, or because they would soon be a part of history. She photographed them out of a moral identification with all that they stood for. As the 84-year-old photographer says in her new book: "It was absolutely wicked to tear the Pennsylvania Station down. It was cheating America, denying Americans their cultural heritage."

Berenice Abbott's 1938 photo of Flatiron Building, Broadway and 23d Street.

If Berenice Abbott's photographs stay alive for us, where the photographs of so many others go dead, it is because we know that she would never "cheat on America." To whatever she photographed — a newsstand, a basement restaurant in the Bowery, a row of tenements just above East Houston Street — she gave everything that she had. She watched the New York light — so beautiful in the early morning, but so much stronger in the afternoon — and she took forever to level her camera with the help of a spirit level. "None of it was easy," she said not long ago. But how well worthwhile it was!

The Witkin Gallery is open weekdays from 11 A.M. to 6 P.M., tomorrow from noon to 5 P.M. (closed Sunday and Monday).