

Betty Parsons: *Invisible Presence*

Alexander Gray Associates

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Invisible Presence

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Alexander Gray Associates



Parsing Parsons: In Search of the Invisible Presence

By Abigail Winograd

In February of 1972, Betty Parsons went to Africa. An inveterate traveler, Parsons often recorded brief snippets of her journey as well as sketches and watercolors in notebooks she carried with her (fig. 1). On this occasion, her pocket diary includes brief mentions of lunch by a river in sight of twenty-two bathing hippopotami, lions making a kill, and an early morning breakfast in camp before leaving for Paris.¹ One might imagine that it is the view from her tent that Parsons recorded on canvas in the painting *African Dawn* (1972; see page 45), a reminiscence in which fluid brushstrokes, sinuous lines, and bold patches of pink, blue, orange, and gold float on a field of chartreuse. The painting is typical of Parsons' particular brand of abstraction, never hard-edged, not exactly gestural or biomorphic, but always colorful; playful; bold; and expressive.

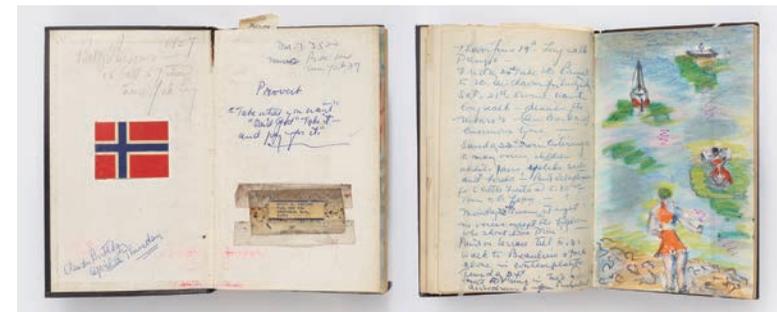


Fig 1 Betty Parsons' personal diaries from 1950 and 1957

A thirteen-year-old Parsons decided on a career as an artist after visiting the legendary Armory Show of 1913 (fig. 2). As it was unbecoming a woman of her stature to attend college, a young Betty (née Betty Bierne Pierson), scion of



Fig 2 The Armory Art Show in New York, 1913.
Photo: Bettmann / Getty Images

an old New York family, studied sculpture and took classes at the Parsons School of Design. She obtained her formal artistic training in Paris, studying with Ossip Zadkine and Antoine Bourdelle alongside Alberto Giacometti during the 1920s (see page 57), a city to which she had come to obtain a quiet and hasty divorce, bringing an end to her brief and unhappy marriage to Schuyler Livingston Parsons. As an art student in the French capital, she found

herself amongst a storied community of American expats and became deeply enmeshed with both the artistic and literary circles that swirled around Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and the like (fig. 3).



Fig 3 Betty Parsons and Caroline Prentice in Paris, c.1922

Despite her proximity to the development and growth of abstract art in the beginning of the twentieth century, Parsons did not adopt abstraction as her own mode of expression until 1947, motivated, she would later note, by a desire to capture the feeling rather than the image of an event. Parsons' artistic personality is evident even in her landscapes (*Aix en Provence*, 1927; see page 14) and portraits (*Breton Woman*, 1929; see page 15) from the 1920s and 1930s, executed while still in Europe during her summers in France learning the finer points of watercolors under the tutelage of the English painter Arthur Lindsey. Her early interest in capturing fleeting impressions, personalities, and the character of her surroundings would persist throughout her artistic life. Parsons' works from this period combine the energy of Cezanne's post-impressionistic landscapes with the dense yet diffuse sfumato of Japanese and Chinese ink drawings. Likewise, the spontaneity and intensity found in her lush reminiscences of the deep greens and browns of the rolling hills of the *Canary Islands* from 1932 (see page 16) remain defining characteristics of her later abstractions.



Fig 4 Target, 1970

Parsons innate ability to locate the essence of a place or a moment was the driving force behind her work. Her sources of inspiration were varied, though often drawn from extensive travel in Africa, Europe, Mexico, Japan, and elsewhere but also from Native American art

(*Target*, 1970; fig. 4), the American west (*Wyoming Magic*, 1974; see page 46), Eastern spirituality (*Chinese Image*, n.d.), and found objects (*Flying Duck*, 1981; see page 51). Parsons was always striving, she would tell critics and/or reporters, to capture "the invisible presence."² Interviewed by the artist Helène Aylon in 1977 for *Heresies* magazine, in a special issue on lesbian art and artists, Parsons said, "The most permanent thing in the world is the invisible, you can't get away from it."³

Parsons died in 1982 leaving a large trove of sketches, drawings, paintings, and sculptures. Shortly before her death and again in the past

two decades, Parsons career as an artist has been unearthed and she has, like many underappreciated female artists of her generation, been "rediscovered." This would be a relatively unremarkable development given the recent tendency of art historians, museums, and the art market to mine the past for deserving artists overlooked or marginalized by centuries-old narratives that long ignored the presence of women, homosexuals, people of color, etc. if it weren't for the fact that Parsons' place in history has long been established. She is not an unknown figure languishing in undeserved obscurity but rather a visionary gallerist whose perseverance and artistic eye helped shape and define Abstract Expressionism.



Fig 5 Parsons at her gallery, c.1960

As the founder and driving force behind the Betty Parsons Gallery (fig. 5), she played a pivotal role in the history of Modernism. Indeed, she breathed life into the most American of movements—one that, despite decades of efforts by scholars and academics to complicate and revise the narrative of twentieth-century art, remains inviolably resistant to relativization, shrouded in an aura of near mythological reverence. The story of how Parsons helped New York supplant Paris as the center of the artistic universe by championing an art form that would become synonymous with democracy, American values, and post-war modernism, is intimately connected to her life and training as an artist. Her familiarity with artistic trends made her uniquely able to identify the shifts occurring in global art, and to appreciate the innovative tendencies at the heart of mid-century American abstraction in the United States.⁴ It is worth noting here that the Betty Parsons Gallery was also ahead of its time in representing women, artists of color, and Latin American artists, including, José Bernal, Gertrude "Gego" Goldschmidt, Agnes Martin, Roberto Matta, Louise Nevelson, Kenzo Okada, Jeanne Reynal, and Thomas Sills, among others (fig. 6). The fact that she persisted in promoting the audacious art despite the overwhelmingly negative critical and public reception of the new breed of American painting is a testament to the quality of her confidence in her own opinions.



Fig 6 Installation view of *Chorros* at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, *Sculpture and Drawings*, 1971. Photo: Ana María Castillo. ©Fundación Gego

Parsons' undeniable significance as a gallerist quickly obscured her own artistic practice, despite the fact that her homecoming to New York from

California—where she had settled upon her return from Paris in 1933, teaching art, painting portraits on commission and studying with Alexander Archipenko—was funded, in part, by the sale of her own work (Mary Quinn Sullivan, one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was among her patrons). We cannot say that Parsons was uncomfortable with the limited attention her work was paid by the critical establishment but given the fact that she continued to produce and show work as well as her consistent tendency to identify herself as an artist confirms that she was not, nor did she think of herself as, just a Sunday painter.⁵ Financial considerations drove her into gallery work in New York and it was that career that continued to keep her afloat. Testimonials to her limited prowess as a visionary art dealer are as legion as are stories, some her

own, of selling works from her own collection to get by during leaner times.⁶ Yet, within the synoptic view of mid-century Abstraction, Parsons is cast in a supporting role—a position not dissimilar to that afforded to her notable female contemporaries Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, and Helen Frankenthaler—relegating her work to the artistic margins while reserving celebrity status to the white, brash young men—none more famous than Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, or, as she dubbed them, “the four horsemen”—that Parsons promoted in a professional capacity.

Whilst doing what she could to transform art as we know it, Parsons was always also making art herself. She developed a working method that relied heavily upon spontaneity and a desire to convey “sheer energy” and “the new spirit”⁷ (fig. 7), an essence captured in the auratic, somewhat vaginal portal at the center of *Flame* (1967; see page 39). She spent her weekends in a studio in the hamlet of Southold, Long Island, designed specifically for her by the artist Tony Smith (see page 62), drawing inspiration from her natural surroundings (fig. 8). In frequently naming her paintings after the locales that inspired them, Parsons lent her work a distinctive sense of place. She chronicled, for example, the changing moods and seasons of Maine on nine separate canvases over the course of three decades (see page 43), the heat of the desert in *Red Sea* (1963;



Fig 7 *Southern Exposure*, c.1979



Fig 8 Betty Parsons working on her wood constructions in her studio, Southold, Long Island, February 16, 1975. Photo: Gwyn Metz



Fig 10 *Red Sea*, 1963



Fig 11 *Midtown*, 1956



Fig 12 Parsons with one of her wooden constructions at her exhibition opening at Truman Gallery, New York, October 14, 1978. Photo: Gwyn Metz

fig. 9), and the energy of her native Manhattan in *Midtown* (1956; fig. 10). She was a dynamic colorist embracing a sometimes-eccentric palette that grew increasingly saturated over the years. One might consider, by way of comparison, the dull browns and muted greens of Parson’s paintings of *End of Winter* from 1958–59 (see page 27) with the dense green and lavish blues, with the latter being her favorite color, of *Bird in a Boat* from 1971 (see page 41). In 1965, she returned to sculpture, creating modestly sized works composed of pieces of detritus (drift wood, signage, pieces of furniture) gathered from the beach near her home, which she then painted (see pages 50 and 52). They are, in some ways, reminiscent of Dada sculpture but also indebted to a lifelong interest in Native American and other forms of artistic practice (fig. 11).

Parsons’ artistic work has been treated as a footnote and timidly recognized aside to her otherwise admirable career as an art professional. Like the other notable and talented women who populated the AbEx moment, Parsons’ work has been belatedly and modestly lauded whilst inevitably deemed inferior to or chided as mere simulacra of that produced by her male peers. Given her proximity to mid-century abstraction, it is not a surprise that Parsons should be discussed in the context of the art and artists she championed. However, the dismissive and patronizing tone used to assess her oeuvre indicates how little the art world’s assessment of this period has changed. A 2008 review in *Artforum* argued Parsons was unable to rival the “cosmic ambition” of the artists she represented.



Fig 12 Parsons at her studio, 1969

The reviewer went on to equate scale with value, comparing Parsons' sculptures to domestic objects or knick-knacks one might find in a beach house owned by an elderly couple.⁸ One wonders what would have been said about Parsons if she was not a woman who spent her life in the company of men whose reputations were only matched by their egos. If she had been more of an outsider, like Agnes Martin (an artist she worked with and considered a friend; see page 61),

she might have garnered more respect. We can of course contextualize Betty Parsons, but her work should be appraised on its own merits. She remains a figure whose intellectual presence in the history of mid-century abstraction is unassailably secure while her aesthetic place remains undefined.

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Notes

- 1 Smithsonian Archives, Box 42, Folder 10: Pocket Diaries 1972–1973.
- 2 Aylon, Helene, "Interview with Betty Parsons," *Women Art*, Fall 1977, 10–13, 20.
- 3 Interview reproduced in Judith Stein and Helène Aylon, "The Parsons Effect," *Art in America*, November, 11, 2013, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/betty-parsons>. The interview was never published in *Heresies*, but an excerpt appeared in *Woman Art* that same year.
- 4 Clement Greenberg remarked, "There was a certain atmosphere around these artists that Betty was in touch with and maybe part of it, too." Greenberg quoted in Carol Strickland, "Betty Parsons's 2 Lives: She was Artist, too," *New York Times*, June 28, 1992.
- 5 Richard Tuttle, who Parsons exhibited, quoted Parsons as stating: "I would give up my gallery in a second if the world would accept me as an artist," in Naples Museum of Art. *The Painted Sculpture of Betty Parsons*. Exh. cat. Naples, FL, 2005.
- 6 Leo Castelli quoted in Carol Strickland, "Betty Parsons's 2 Lives: She was an Artist, too," *New York Times*, June 28, 1992.
- 7 Hall, Lee. "Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector." New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1991, 89.
- 8 Frankel, David. "Review: Betty Parsons Spanierman Modern," *Artforum* December 2008.



Facing: Parsons at her studio, n.d.



Untitled (male figure), c.1922



Untitled (cat), c.1922



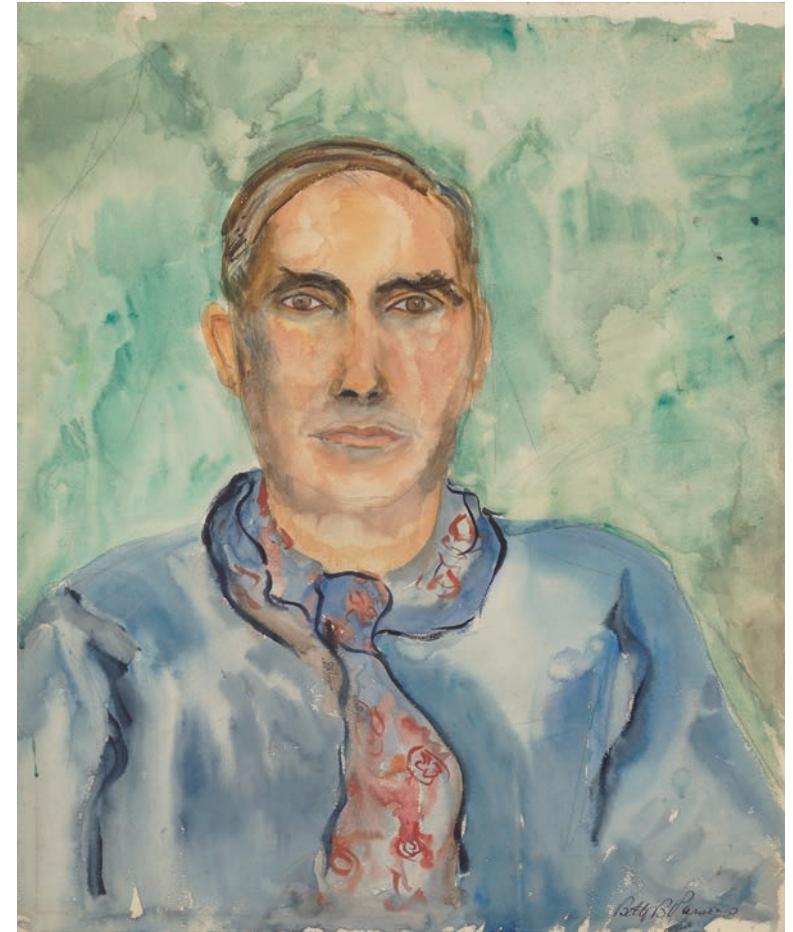
Aix en Provence, 1927



Breton Woman, 1929



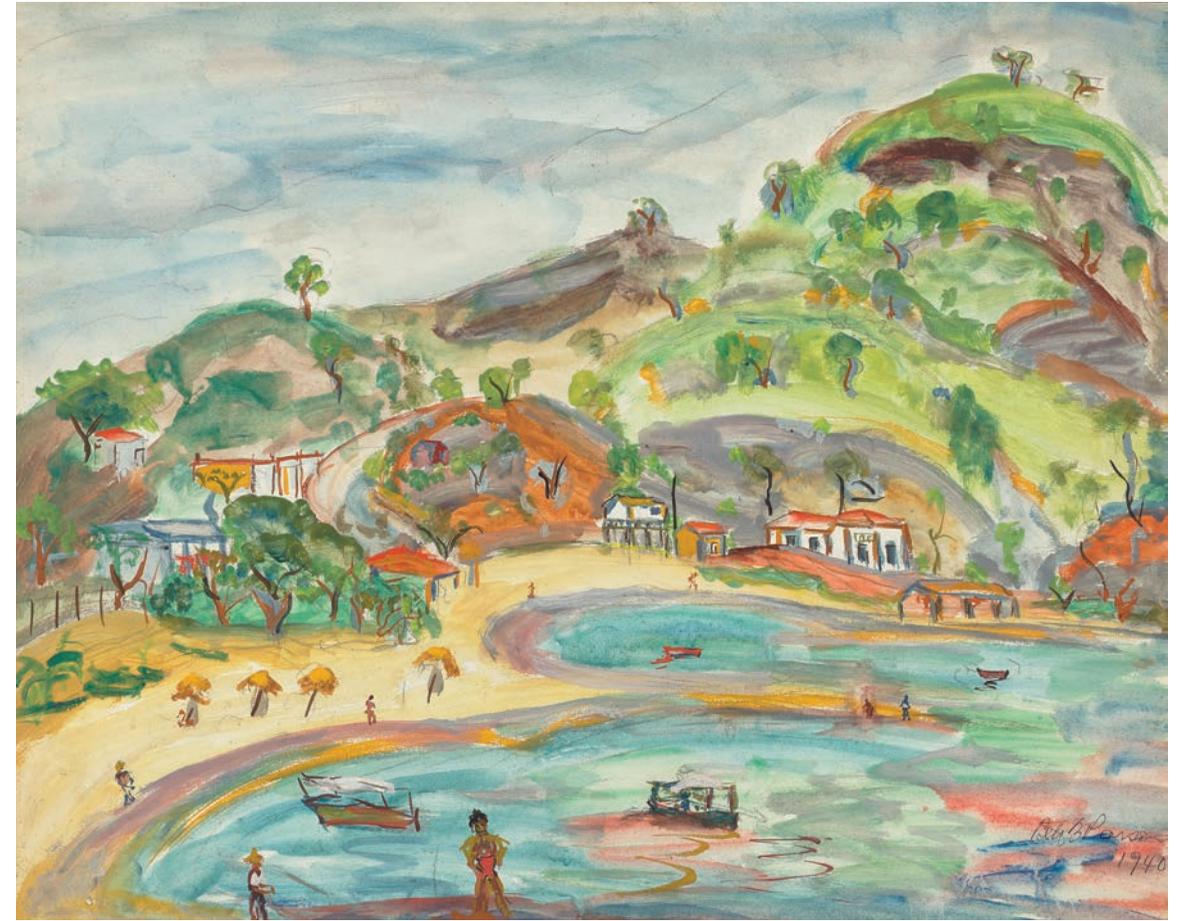
Canary Islands, 1932



Stuart Davis, 1933



Old Fort—Nassau, 1939



Celeste Beach, Acapulco Mexico, 1940



Rockport, 1943



The Circle, 1947



Untitled, c.1950



Walking Bull or The Minotaur, 1954



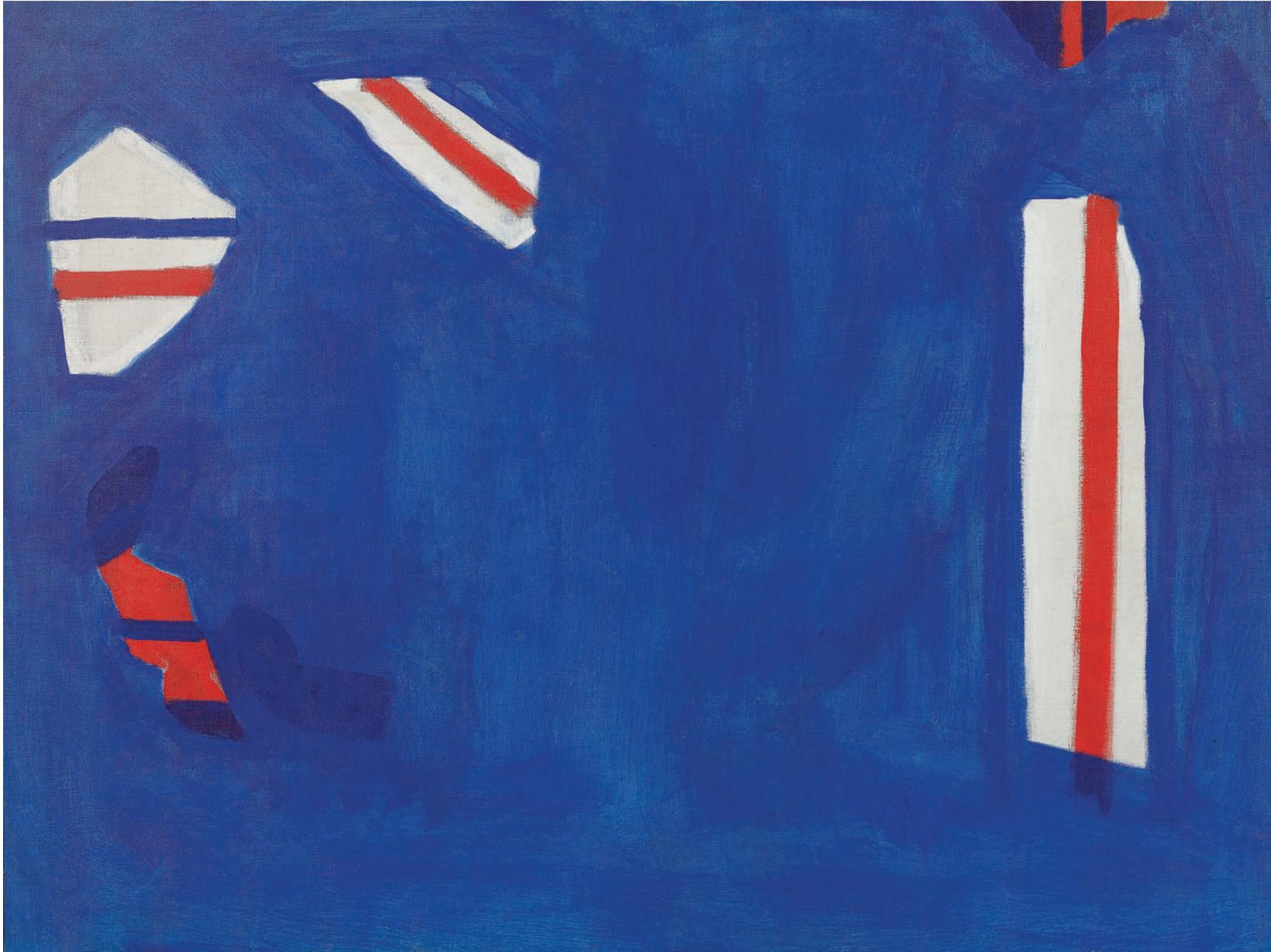
End of Winter, 1958-59



Sputnik, 1961

March 3rd, 1962





Fourth of July, 1964

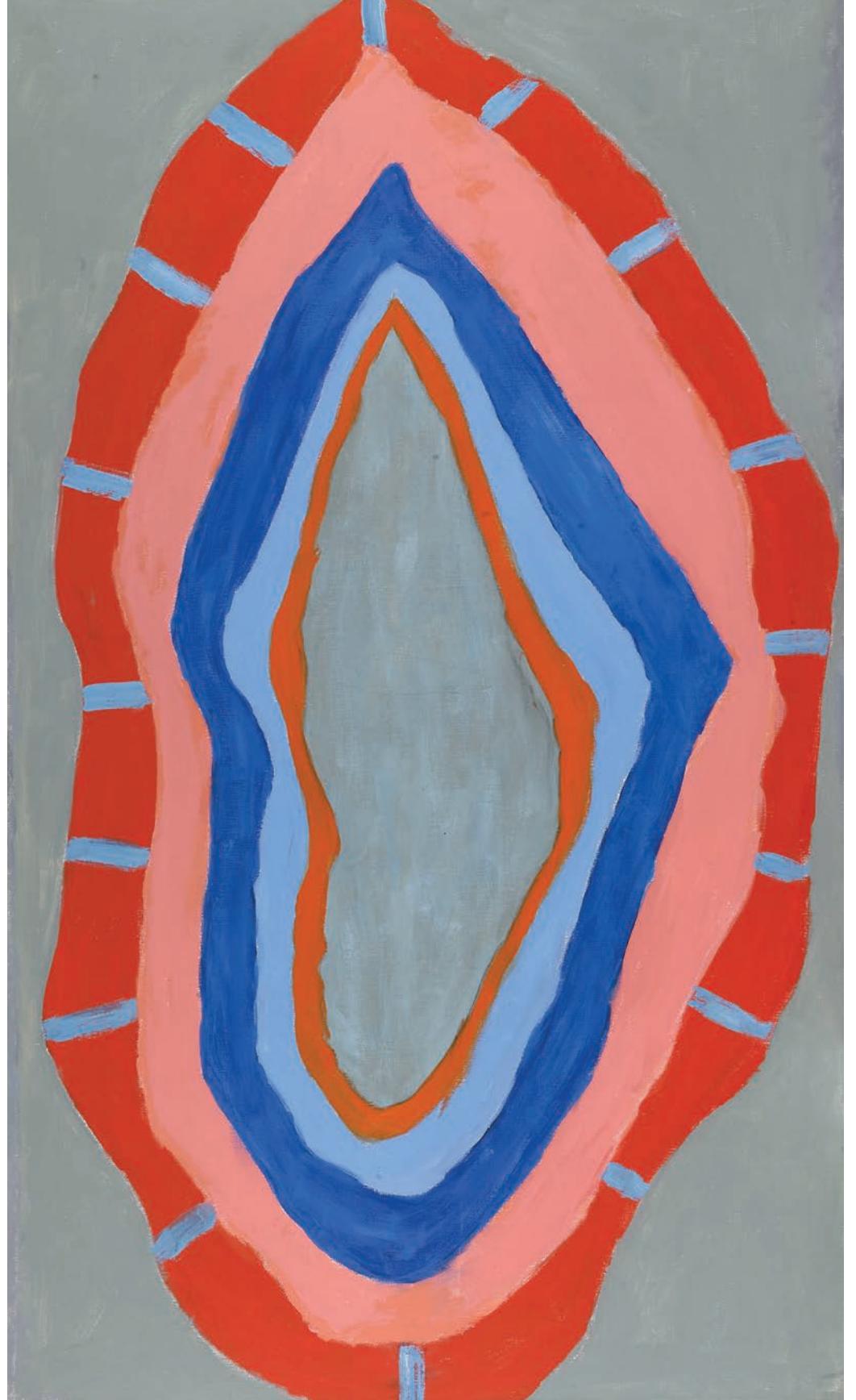


Fire Dance, 1967



Victory, 1967

Flame, 1967





Bird in a Boat, 1971

Maine, 1972



African Dawn, 1972





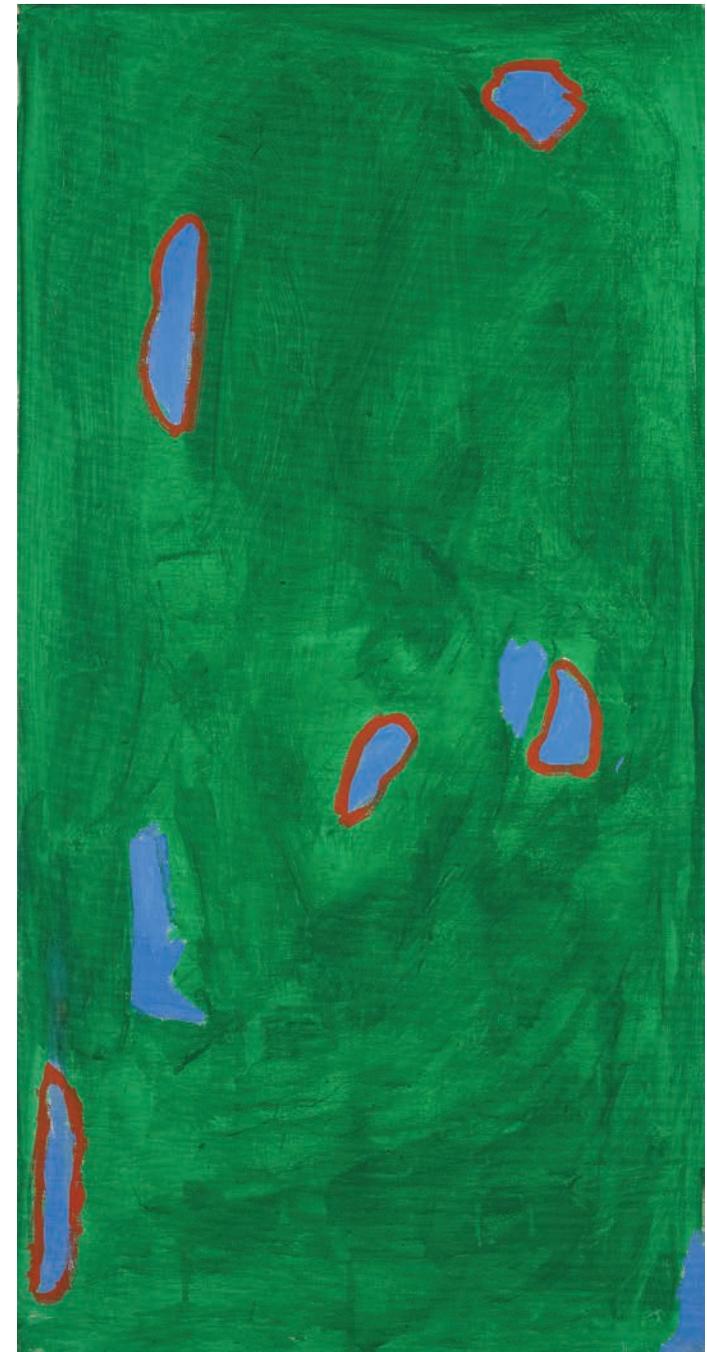
Wyoming Magic, 1974



Journey, 1975



Challenge, 1976



The Grass and the Wine, 1980



Punch and Judy Theater, 1975



Flying Duck, 1981



African Village, 1981



Betty Parsons in Cody, WY, 1974.
Photo: Gwyn Metz

Betty Parsons: Selected Chronology, 1900–1982

1900 Born Betty Bierne Pierson in New York City.

I was born in New York City on 48th Street where there's a skyscraper now—How the city has changed! Our family lived there in a brownstone house. Father was a darling. He was a stockbroker but he spent his life losing money... Mother had been a southern belle. She had money and she built a house in Newport where we spent many summers. (1972).¹

1910 Is enrolled in Miss Chapin's School for Girls.

1913 Attends the Armory Show (see page 5), inspired by the controversy surrounding the show and her experience viewing works by Maillol and Bourdelle, Parson decides to become an artist and declares, "I am 'The New Spirit'"² (fig. 1).

1915 Attends first formal art classes in the studio of Gutzon Borglum.

1919 Marries Schuyler Livingston Parsons at Church of the Heavenly Rest, in New York City.
They embark on grand tour of Europe.

1920 Begins studio practice.

1922 Moves to Paris. Enrolls in sculpture classes at Antoine Bourdelle's Academie de la Grande Chaumière, studies alongside Alberto Giacometti (fig. 2).

'Beware of learning too much about art,' he [Bourdelle] used to tell us, 'because it will keep you from finding your own way.' Giacometti was in the same class, but we were both so shy we hardly spoke. Once, Bourdelle said that Giacometti and I were the only ones who were trying to say something about the model, not just copying (1975).³

1923 Divorces S.L. Parsons and is subsequently disinherited from the Pierson family. Buys house in Montparnasse, lives there with lover and fellow artist, Adge Baker and their dog Timmy (figs. 3 and 4).

1925 With Baker attends English painter Arthur Lindsey's summer watercolor classes on the coast of Brittany (see page 15).

1926 Becomes acquainted with American expatriates living in Paris, including Gertrude Stein, Alice Toklas, and Janet Flanner, who



Fig 1 Betty Parsons, Newport, RI, 1914

Fig 2 Parsons in the studio of Antoine Bourdelle at Academie de la Grande Chaumière c.1924, Paris, France. Standing on the far right, Alberto Giacometti and Parsons, second from right, at center with white beard is Bourdelle

Fig 3 Parsons with her dog Timmy in Paris, c.1923

Fig 4 Timmy, 1923



Fig 5 Parsons in Paris with friend, c.1940



Fig 6 Parsons and best friend from childhood Dorothy "Dumpy" Heydell Oelreichs at Hope Williams ranch, New Mexico, 1933



Fig 7 Diary entry by Parsons on Alexander Archipenko, 1935



Fig 8 Parsons at one of her solo exhibitions at Midtown Galleries, New York, 1937–38. Photo: William H. Allen

introduces Parsons to Josephine Baker. Becomes regular dance partners with Alexander Calder and, together, they join a basketball club.

- 1927 Studies with Ossip Zadkine. The New Chenil Gallery in London, UK, includes her work in a group exhibition.
- 1929 The New York Stock Exchange crashes starting the Great Depression (1929–39), the Parsons family loses their fortunes and Parsons' alimony stops.
- 1932 Travels to the Canary Islands (see page 16). Ends relationship with Baker.
- 1933 First solo exhibition of watercolors opens at Galerie des Quatre Chemins, Paris, France. Returns to America and moves to California, stopping along the way in Wyoming to visit Chapin schoolmate Hope Williams at her ranch (fig. 6). Studies sculpture with Alexander Archipenko (fig. 7).
- 1934 Stendhal Gallery in Los Angeles, CA presents a solo exhibition of watercolors and temperas of travels in the United States and France.
- 1935 Teaches sculpture and portrait painting classes in Santa Barbara, and Hollywood, CA. Returns to New York City. Has short-lived relationship with Stuart Davis (see page 17). Begins exhibiting at Midtown Galleries, New York, having solo exhibitions every year through 1958 (fig. 8).
- 1936 Begins working on sales at Midtown Galleries. Enrolls in classes at the Art Students League, New York.
- 1938 Works as a gallery assistant to Mary Sullivan, wife of Cornelius Sullivan, one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Travels to Ireland, France, and England where she visits Adge Baker.
- 1940 Befriends journalist Rosalind Constable. Is invited to start a contemporary art gallery within the Wakefield Bookshop at 64 East 55th Street. Exhibits the work of Hedda Sterne, Adolph Gottlieb, and Alfonso Ossorio.

In terms of my galleries, I never thought about whether the artist was a male or a female. I always thought, 'Are they good or not good?'.⁴

1944 Invites Barnett Newman to curate the exhibition *Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture* at Wakefield Gallery (fig. 9). Mortimer Brandt asks Parsons to become the Director of Contemporary Art at his gallery at 15 East 57th Street.

1946 Brandt returns to England after World War II. Parsons opens Betty Parsons Gallery at 15 East 57th Street (see page 7; fig. 10), inaugurating the space with the exhibition *Northwest Coast Indian Art* (fig. 11).

1947 Visits New Mexico and meets with Agnes Martin who would later exhibit at Parsons' gallery in 1958 (figs. 12 and 13). Begins to paint abstractions (see page 22).

... one day I was taken to a rodeo and there was a fantastic amount of color and action and I said to myself how could I ever convey such excitement like this and I went home and I did it with my first abstract picture without the horses, without the tents, just a feeling of the color and the action (1968).⁵

The Betty Parsons Gallery presents *The Ideographic Picture* a group show featuring the work of Hans Hoffman, Pietro Lazzari, Boris Margo, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, and Clyfford Still (fig. 13).

1948 Organizes first exhibition of Jackson Pollock at Betty Parson Gallery (fig. 14).

1950 Meets Helen Frankenthaler.

Betty and her gallery helped construct the center of the art world . . . She was one of the last of her breed (Frankenthaler, 1992).⁶

1954 Travels for an extended period throughout Mexico, a country she visited frequently throughout her life (see page 19).

1955 Betty Parsons Gallery presents *Ten Years*, Clement Greenberg writes the catalog introduction.

In a sense like that in which a painter is referred to as a painter's painter or a poet as a poet's poet, Mrs. Parsons is an artist's—and a critic's—gallery: a place where art goes on and is not just shown and sold (Greenberg, 1955).⁷

1957 Studies Subud, a form of meditation. Embarks on a world tour starting aboard the S.S. *President Wilson* she visits Japan, Hong Kong, Angkor Wat, Bombay, the Taj Mahal, Greece, Venice, France, and England.

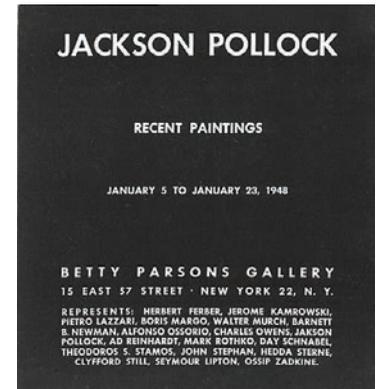
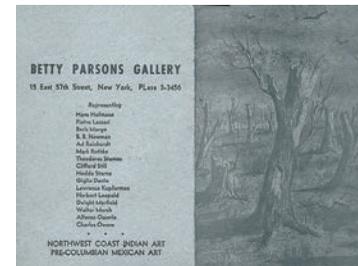
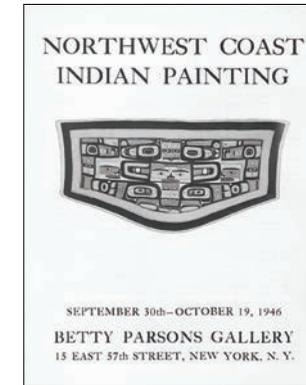
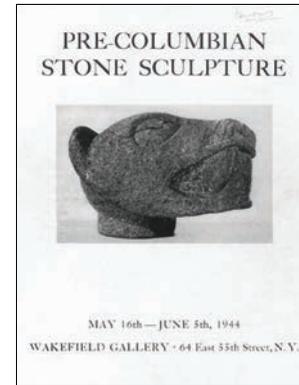


Fig 9 Exhibition poster, Wakefield Gallery, 1944, Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal papers. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig 10 Postcard from Betty Parsons Gallery, 1946, Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal papers. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig 11 Catalogue cover, exhibition Northwest Coast Indian Painting, Betty Parsons Gallery, 1946, Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal paper. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig 12 Parsons and Agnes Martin, n.d.. Photo: Ann Hall Davis

Fig 13 Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, William Congdon, Betty Parsons and others, c.1960, unidentified photographer. Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal papers. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig 14 Exhibition poster, *Jackson Pollock: Recent Painting*, 1948

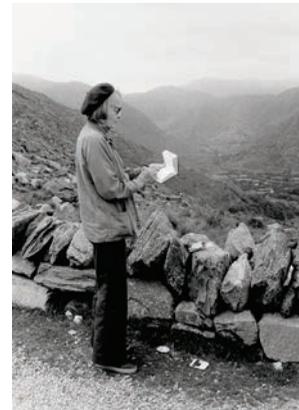
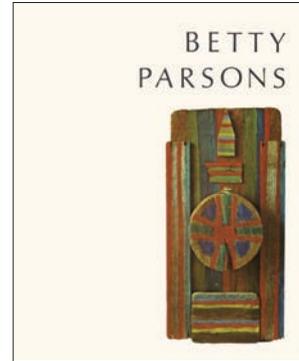
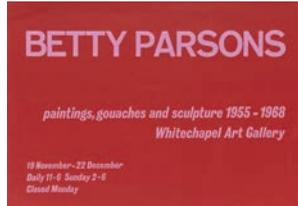


Fig 15 Parsons' studio in Southold, Long Island, NY; designed by Tony Smith. © Tony Smith Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Fig 16 Parsons (standing on stool) and Sally Fairweather at Parson's studio choosing sculptures for Parsons' exhibition at Fairweather Hardin Gallery, July 31, 1979

Fig 17 Cover *Vogue* magazine, October 1963, featuring article on Betty Parsons

Fig 18 Sylvia Sleigh, *Betty Parsons*, 1963

Fig 19 Exhibition poster from Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1968

Fig 20 Parsons in Africa, 1972

Fig 21 *Africa, Elephant*, 1972

Fig 22 Exhibition catalogue cover, *Betty Parsons Retrospective: An Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture*, 1974

Fig 23 Parsons sketching in Ireland, August 1975. Photo: Gwyn Metz

- 1958 Has solo exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, GA.
- 1959 Sculptor Tony Smith designs Parsons' home and art studio in Southold, Long Island (figs. 15 and 16), where she continues to make art work until her death.
- 1963 Exhibits at the Miami Museum of Modern Art, FL. Betty Parsons Gallery moves to 24 West 57th Street. Parsons' close friend and companion Strelsa van Scriver dies of cancer. *Vogue* magazine publishes article by Lawrence Alloway "Betty Parsons: Diary of an Art Dealer" (fig. 17). Sylvia Sleigh, paints portrait of Parsons (fig. 18).
- 1965 Begins to construct assemblage sculptures from flotsam collected along the north-shore of Long Island, New York (see page 53).
- 1966 Exhibits assemblages at Southold Gallery, Southold, NY.
- 1968 *Betty Parsons: painting, gouaches and sculpture 1955–1968* opens at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (fig. 19).
- 1971 Exhibits painted stones, assemblages, and acrylic and gouache paintings at the Studio Gallery, Washington, DC.
- 1973 Appears on CBS interview with Mike Wallace. Travels to Zaire, Africa (figs. 20 and 21).
- 1974 Exhibition *Betty Parsons Retrospective: An Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture* opens at the Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey (fig. 22).
- Well I have that Irish thing in me. I have always been fascinated with what I call the invisible presence. We all have it. Everything has it. . . a room has it. And that is what I am intrigued with. . . especially when I am working. That invisible presence. You know that big painting . . . the one you see when you come in the big room. When I was doing it, I was filled with that invisible presence. It was like a journey. I was riding into some strange country that didn't exist.*⁸
- 1975 Travels to Ireland with companion Gwyn Metz (fig. 23). Exhibits *Constructions and Drawings* at Elaine Benson Gallery, East Hampton, NY.
- 1977 *Paintings and Constructions* exhibited at Kornblee Gallery, New York.
- 1978 Invites artist Lee Hall to write her biography, *Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector*, which is published in 1991.

1980 Exhibits at the Nigel Greenwood Gallery, London, UK.

1981 Retires from Betty Parsons Gallery, the gallery subsequently closes.

1982 Dies on July 23 in Southold, Long Island, NY.

Betty steadily grew and improved as a person and an artist. She was in a state of becoming until the end (Hedda Sterne, 1992).⁹

Farrar Fitzgerald is the Betty Parsons Foundation archivist and cataloguer.

Notes

- 1 Betty Parsons' interview with WABI television Maine, 1972. All quotes by Betty Parsons, except when otherwise noted.
- 2 Lee Hall, *Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector* (New York: Harry N Abrams, 1991), 23.
- 3 Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: A Keeper of the Treasure," *New Yorker* (June 9, 1975), 47–48.
- 4 Interview with Hélène Aylon, *WomanArt*, Fall 1977.
- 5 Betty Parsons interview with Collette Roberts, 1968.
- 6 Helen Frankenthaler quoted by Carol Strickland "Betty Parsons's 2 Lives: She Was An Artist, Too" *New York Times* (June 28, 1992).
- 7 Clement Greenberg, introduction for exhibition catalog "Ten Years" at Betty Parsons Gallery, 1955.
- 8 Betty Parsons interview with Hélène Aylon, *WomanArt*, Fall 1977.
- 9 Hedda Sterne quoted by Carol Strickland "Betty Parsons's 2 Lives: She Was An Artist, Too" *New York Times* (June 28, 1992)

Parsons sketching on the steps of her studio,
Southold, Long Island, spring 1971. Photo: Gwyn Metz



Betty Parsons (b.1900, New York City, NY–d.1982, Southold, NY) was an abstract painter and sculptor who is best known as a dealer of Mid-Century art. Throughout her storied career as a gallerist, she maintained a rigorous artistic practice, painting during weekends in her Long Island studio. Parsons' eye for innovative talent stemmed from her own training as an artist and guided her commitment to new and emerging artists of her time, impacting the canon of Twentieth-Century art in the United States.

Parsons was drawn to art at an early age when in 1913 she attended the Armory Show in New York City. As she came of age, she became dissatisfied with the traditional models of education and limited occupations for women at the time. Following the dissolution of her marriage to Schuyler Livingston Parsons in 1923, she studied painting and sculpture in Paris at Antoine Bourdelle's Academie de la Grande Chaumière learning alongside Alberto Giacometti. Her ten years in Paris centered around the expatriate community of artists and cultural figures, including Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, and Adge Baker, in pursuit of a life in art. Upon her return to the United States in 1933, Parsons continued to create, spending time in California and New York. In 1935, she had her first solo exhibition of paintings at Midtown Galleries, New York, and following this show, she was offered a job installing works and selling paintings on commission, sparking her curatorial interest and developing her professional identity as an art dealer. In 1946, Parsons opened her eponymous gallery in New York, and after the closure of Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery in 1947, she inherited Guggenheim's roster of artists, including Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Clyfford Still. While her gallery's legacy is closely tied to these leading figures, Parsons also championed a diverse program of artists, showcasing work by women, gays and artists of color, reflecting her liberal and inclusive values and eclectic taste.

While operating her gallery, Parsons continued to make art. Following her formal training as a sculptor and landscape watercolorist, Parsons made a stylistic departure in 1947 when she began to work abstractly to capture what she called "sheer energy" and "the new spirit." From the late 1940s onward, her paintings conveyed her passion for spontaneity and creative play through impulsive gestural brushstrokes and organic forms. She employed thin layers of vibrant paint, often allowing the surface of the canvas to remain visible. Parsons had a long interest in ancient and ethnographic arts, as well as mystical and non-Western spiritual practices, including meditation. Guided by these interests, she chose to set aside the rigid theoretical framework of contemporary abstraction, allowing instead for expressive improvisation in her paintings.

Throughout her life, Parsons traveled widely in pursuit of new influences, taking frequent trips to Mexico, France, Italy, Africa, and Japan. She meticulously recorded her travels in her journals as watercolors and sketches, and often drew on a sense of place in her work. In 1959, Parsons would spend more time in Long Island, painting at her home/studio designed by the sculptor Tony Smith, perched above the Long Island Sound. Her weekends would be consumed by observing nature, and her art became increasingly saturated with color. In addition to painting, in 1965 she returned to sculpture, making polychrome assemblages of discarded wood and driftwood she would collect on the beach. Parsons died in 1982, a year after closing her 57th Street gallery, leaving a multi-faceted legacy as a woman and an artist of the Twentieth Century.

Betty Parsons' work has been the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions at The Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY (1992); the Montclair Museum of Art, Montclair, NJ (1974); Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (1968), and The Miami Museum of Modern Art, Miami, FL (1963). Parsons' work is represented in prominent public collections including The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; The Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY; the Montclair Museum of Art, Montclair, NJ; and The High Museum, Atlanta, GA; among others.



Betty Parsons, 1979. Photo: Lisl Steiner

Checklist

Untitled (male figure), c.1922
Bronze
15h x 6.5w x 4.75d in
(38.1h x 16.51w x 12.07d cm)

Untitled (cat), c.1922
Bronze
8h x 4.75w x 5d in
(20.32h x 12.07w x 12.7d cm)

Aix en Provence, 1927
Graphite and watercolor on paper
13.75h x 20w in (34.92h x 50.8w cm)

Breton Woman, 1929
Pencil and gouache on paper
24h x 17.75w in (60.96h x 45.09w cm)

Canary Islands, 1932
Graphite and gouache on paper
18.13h x 21.25w in (46.05h x 53.98w cm)

Stuart Davis, 1933
Pencil and gouache on paper
22.62h x 18.88w in (57.45h x 47.96w cm)

Old Fort–Nassau, 1939
Graphite and gouache on paper
15.75h x 19.75w in (40.01h x 50.17w cm)

Celeste Beach, Acapulco Mexico, 1940
Graphite and gouache on paper
15.75h x 19.75w in (40.01h x 50.17w cm)

Rockport, 1943
Graphite and gouache on paper
14.75h x 17.88w in (37.47h x 45.42w cm)

The Circle, 1947
Gouache on paper
16h x 20w in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)

Untitled, c.1950
Acrylic on panel
10h x 16w in (25.4h x 40.64w cm)

Walking Bull or The Minotaur, 1954
Acrylic on canvas
30.75h x 35.5w in (78.11h x 90.17w cm)

End of Winter, 1958–59
Oil on canvas
37.75h x 37w in (95.89h x 93.98w cm)

Sputnik, 1961
Oil on canvas
30h x 22w in (76.2h x 55.88w cm)

March 3rd, 1962
Acrylic on canvas
40h x 30w in (101.6h x 76.2w cm)

Fourth of July, 1964
Acrylic on canvas
30h x 40w in (76.2h x 101.6w cm)

Fire Dance, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
43h x 43.75w in (109.22h x 111.13w cm)

Victory, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
41h x 47w in (104.14h x 119.38w cm)

Flame, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
69.5h x 40.5w in (176.53h x 102.87w cm)

Brick in the Sky, 1968
Acrylic on canvas
39.5h x 30w in (100.33h x 76.2w cm)

Bird in a Boat, 1971
Acrylic on canvas
60.25h x 48w in (153.04h x 121.92w cm)

Maine, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
24h x 16.25w in (60.96h x 41.28w cm)

African Dawn, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
67.5h x 35.5w in (171.45h x 90.17w cm)

Wyoming Magic, 1974
Acrylic on paper
24h x 19w in (60.96h x 48.26w cm)

Journey, 1975
Acrylic on canvas
67.5h x 53.75w in (171.45h x 136.53w cm)

Punch and Judy Theater, 1975
Acrylic on wood
8h x 9.5w x 6.5d in
(20.32h x 24.13w x 16.51d cm)

Challenge, 1976
Acrylic on canvas
40h x 30w in (101.6h x 76.2w cm)

The Grass and the Wine, 1980
Acrylic on canvas
44.25h x 23w in (112.4h x 58.42w cm)

Flying Duck, 1981
Acrylic on wood
34h x 20w x 2d in
(86.36h x 50.8w x 5.08d cm)

African Village, 1981
Acrylic on wood
13h x 21w x 4.75d in
(33.02h x 53.34w x 12.07d cm)

Other Illustrated Works

Midtown, 1956
Gouache on paper
20h x 15.5w in (50.8h x 39.37w cm)

Red Sea, 1963
Acrylic on linen
21h x 12.75w in (53.34h x 32.39w cm)

Target, 1970
Acrylic on canvas
24.13h x 20.13w in (61.29h x 51.13w cm)

Southern Exposure, c.1979
Acrylic on canvas
45.5h x 21.25w in (115.57h x 53.98w cm)

Timmy, c.1923
Watercolor on paper
16h x 20w in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)

Elephant, Africa
Watercolor on paper
4.75h x 8.625w in (12.1h x 21.9w cm)

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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