

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/1ilPMkx>

ARCHIVES | 1974

Betty Parsons Exhibits in Montclair

By PIRI HALASZ MARCH 31, 1974

MONTCLAIR—Betty Parsons, one of the more celebrated of Manhattan's artdealers, is known less as a painter and sculptor in her own right. brated of Manhattan's art dealers, is known less as a painter and sculptor in her own right.

The Montclair Art Museum is remedying this defect by offering a major retrospective of Mrs; Parsons's work; the exhibition, which opens today, will continue until May 19.

Mrs. Parsons achieved fame in the late forties and early fifties, when her gallery became the first to show the contributions of most of the leading abstract expressionist painters. With her aid, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and many others aroused controversy and achieved recognition.

More recently, Mrs. Parsons provided a showcase for many painters who were to become renowned in the sixties, among them Ellsworth Kelly and Jack Youngerman. The gallery continues to explore new frontiers with the work of such younger "conceptual artists" as Richard Tuttle.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Par son's own paintings are also in the abstract vein. But it would be a mistake to assume that they borrow directly from the efforts of the artists she has shown.

"When I'm painting in my studio over the weekends, I forget the gallery entirely," Mrs. Parsons observed in an interview. "When I'm in the gallery, I forget that I'm an artist myself."

When she exhibits her own work, it is at the A. M. Sachs Gallery on 57th Street, across the street from her own. Nor is the Montclair showing Mrs. Parsons's first retrospective: in 1968, the Whitechapel Gallery in London mounted an extensive exhibit of her works.

Mrs. Parsons was born in New York and lived in Paris for 10 years; while there, she studied sculpture with Antoine Bourdelle and Ossin Zadkine. Some of the earliest works on view at Montclair include a terracotta head and a bronze cat and dog done in the thirties. Also included are water-colors of a Norman cathedral and a Brittany landscape.

Of greater interest, however, are the paintings and sculptures done since 1960. Mrs. Parsons discovered the joys of abstraction while visiting California in 1947, the year after she opened her gallery in New York.

"I was feeling ill," she recalled, "and some of my friends took me to 'a rodeo. I came back and decided that I wanted to paint not what it looked like, but what it made me feel."

As can be seen in the Montclair show, Mrs. Parsons' recent abstract paintings pursue three separate, but related, styles. In works such as "Clocks of Time," she employs many bright, gay, simple colors built into small, distinct images. She is fond of circles within circles, lozenges within lozenges and bold, stick-like forms.

At the same time, in paintings such as "Moth," Mrs. Parson narrows her palette down to only a few colors. "Moth" shows a single, floating scrap of red on an otherwise all-blue field.

Finally, there is a series of abstracts, such as "Sand With Shapes," which rely on thinly brushed, semitransparent paint and what artists call a "more-gestural technique." This means a painting that shows moil of the artist's participation in the gesture of "laying the paint on."

For pictures such as these, Mrs. Parsons favors a softer spectrum of grays, tans and rusts.

Particularly diverting and evocative of the artist's lifestyle—are the sculptures that Mrs. Parsons has been doing over the last six years. These are assemblages of pieces of wood that she picks up in the dunes adjacent to her beach house in Southhold, L. I.

"The water [Long Island Sound] washes up all kinds of pieces that have been discarded by carpenters and builders," she explained. Among them are circles of

wood and blocks, bits of planks, scraps of plywood and even occasional old signs with faded lettering.

Mrs. Parsons glues them all together into fanciful arrangements that sometimes look like toy ships or little castles. She then paints them with gay stripes of color that still leave portions of the attractively aged wood showing through. Next, she gives them fanciful titles, such as “Wheel of Fun” or “Boomerang.”

“I’ve been called a sophisticated primitive,” Mrs. Parsons remarked.

Certainly, the simplicity of her works indicates its debt to primitive art, but that same simplicity is also a mark of sophistication.

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A version of this archives appears in print on March 31, 1974, on Page 78 of the New York edition with the headline: Betty Parsons Exhibits in Montclair.

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