

# An Artist and Dealer and the Women She Promoted

By HOLLAND COTTER JULY 13, 2005

The dealer and artist Betty Parsons (1900-82) is in the history books for shaping the careers of some of the biggest of postwar American art's big boys. Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko were on her list. Less celebrated is the attention she paid to artists who happened to be women, at a time when a woman was far more likely to earn a reputation as so-and-so's girlfriend than for having an art career.

Those careers did happen, though, and five of them are celebrated in "Betty Parsons and the Women" at Anita Shapolsky Gallery on the Upper East Side. Installed on two floors of a town house, the show has a definite lived-in ambience, with choppy sightlines, and it is too small and unsystematic to be called historical. But it also has enough material to be informative, and some of that material is beautiful, which, of course, has interest on its own.

Abstraction was the smart style of the 1940's and 50's, and the one explored and inflected by three of the artists here. Boffie Johnson's "Bridge" (1949-51), with black girderlike lines against a dripped and spattered ground, is penumbral the way a lot of art at the time was. But a later piece by Ms. Johnson, who is now 93, is just the

opposite. Called "Sun Wedding" (1961), it's a brushy swath of egg-yolk yellow and white, with red and green florets mixed in like peppers in an omelet.

"The Bride Returns II" (1960) by Ethel Schwabacher (1903-84) has almost the same colors, but toned down and molded into a soft-edged geometry dominated by two greenish ovals like heads turned toward each other on a pillow; they almost touch, but don't. Two heads also appear in Schwabacher's "Monday II" (1955), one in profile, the other a skull face-forward, in this case merging, one and the same, in a field of fleshy pink.

From Judith Godwin, born in 1930, comes a dark-and-light vertical painting from 1958 called "Longing." Declamatory and architectural, it's like a hit of Zen calligraphy. Ms. Godwin, who has a retrospective in the works at the Chrysler Museum in Virginia, was deeply absorbed in Buddhist thought at the time, and she was not alone in her interest. The 1950's were when the spiritual awakening that blazed through the 1960's had its start.

The spark connecting the two decades is right there in the the work of Jeanne Patterson Miles (1908-99), a wonderful painter who studied with Ouspensky, worked with Hilla Rebay, and looked at spiritually charged art of every kind, from Tibetan mandalas to jewel-encrusted medieval breviaries to Ethiopian liturgical sculpture to Mondrian. She distilled something of all of this in a handful of exquisite paintings here: small, geometrically exacting, glinting with gold and platinum leaf.

Parsons the artist is also in the exhibition, which travels to the Sage Colleges in Albany (Sept. 6-Oct. 16). But the emphasis is on her role as a dealer, and on the women she promoted, one of whom, Jeanne Reynal (1903-83), worked primarily in mosaic, which she treated the way gestural painters treated paint, as an improvisatory medium. Although she sometimes adhered to fixed designs, she just as often tossed bits of stone, colored glass and shell onto a prepared ground and embedded them where they landed.

The mosaic wall panels in the show, once bright, are time-dimmed and lusterless now. But a free-standing piece like "Sphere," flat, roundish, bumpy with chips of color, is still fresh and strange. What does it bring to mind? A giant chapati, a Luba memory board, a planetary map, a microscopic Blob? Made sometime in the

1950's, in some ways it looks very "then." But it also looks very now, or maybe the way now should look. Clearly, Parsons, her eye fixed on the future, knew what she was doing, and she had the artists to do it with.

The show continues through July 23.

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