

N.Y. / REGION | ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Painter Who Championed Others Gets Her Due

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO AUG. 26, 2006

Betty Parsons, who died in 1982 at the age of 82, was one of the most recognizable figures in the art world of the 1940's, 50's and 60's. As a gallery owner in New York City, she promoted young American artists, among them several of the abstract expressionists; her stable included Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Richard Pousette-Dart.

But Ms. Parsons was also a painter in her own right, mostly of abstract works in the vein of the artists she admired and showed in her gallery. She frequently painted at her weekend home in Southold, which is one of the reasons the Spanierman Gallery in East Hampton is staging a long-overdue retrospective. The other is that her work really deserves to be better known.

Ms. Parsons was classically trained in Paris; she initially wanted to be a sculptor, but then switched to realist painting. She did not have much of a feel for that kind of thing, which is made clear by a pair of early watercolors — one of boats on the water, the other a portrait of her favorite Scottish terrier. But what these early paintings reveal is a highly unusual color sense, which also characterizes much of her later, more abstract work.

Ms. Parsons's colors take a bit of getting used to. She liked lime green, pink, brown and various shades of orange; at least, those are the colors that recur in the more than 40 paintings selected for this exhibition by the curator and critic Ronny Cohen. Ms. Parsons seems to have worked intuitively, inspired in her color choices by a feeling about some aspect or element of nature. She was a born sensualist.

Her best paintings have a tremendous energy, as if the artist, sure of what she wanted, sat down and let the imagery flow. Her brushwork, never hesitant or stiff, is always dashing, vigorous and decisive. She also liked to use the pointed tip of her brush to incise squiggly lines in the paint. You get the feeling that she took great pleasure in painting.

This exhibition contains many large, impressive pictures from throughout Ms. Parsons's career, but her smaller oils and gouaches from the late 40's and the early 50's are captivating. These include "New Orleans Window" (circa late 1940's or early 50's) and several untitled works from the 1950's. The compositions are rhythmic yet nicely balanced.

Ms. Parsons was a great traveler, and a lot of her paintings were made in response to places she visited. The titles of the works recall trips to Mexico, Africa, the Caribbean and cities across the United States. Some of her best work was inspired by the American South. Born into a wealthy and socially prominent family, Ms. Parsons had homes in many places, including Paris and the Caribbean island of St. Martin.

Ms. Parsons's paintings grew more abstract and minimal as she got older. No doubt this was in part a response to changing currents in contemporary art; during the 1960's, the looser expressionistic abstraction championed by Pollock and others gave way to more geometric or hard-edged abstraction.

Her gallery also began to show artists associated with this new movement and subsequent trends, including Ellsworth Kelly, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Rauschenberg.

Ms. Parsons never embraced geometric abstraction, working in a freer, more personal abstract style that often evoked natural forms: waterfalls, ice floes, summer

skies and the beach.

The influence of Georgia O’Keeffe seems evident here, especially in a painting like “Flame” (1967), a gaping vaginal cavity. Other paintings evoke Native American textiles.

Writing in the exhibition catalog, Ms. Cohen makes the argument that Ms. Parsons was such an interesting and influential art dealer because she was also a gifted painter. This seems fair; the works in this exhibition make clear that she had a much deeper relationship to the art she showed than that of a shopkeeper putting out stock. Much of the art she exhibited never sold, especially during the early years when she was promoting Pollock.

But in choosing to promote other artists and paint on the side, Ms. Parsons never managed to define her own style. Her paintings could be radically different from one year to the next, with no apparent logic or purpose behind the stylistic change.

Perhaps it had something to do with her personality. Headstrong and impulsive, she was a creative spirit who refused to be tied down.

“Betty Parsons: A Painting Retrospective,” Spanierman Gallery, 68 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, through Sept. 11. Information: (631) 329-9530 or www.spanierman.com.

A version of this article appears in print on , on Page L17 of the New York edition with the headline: Painter Who Championed Others Gets Her Due.

© 2017 The New York Times Company