

Art in Review; Betty Parsons

By ROBERTA SMITH

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Painted Sculpture

Art Gallery of the Graduate Center

City University of New York

365 Fifth Avenue, at 34th Street

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Three dozen strong, these jauntily nautical reliefs and sculptures by Betty Parsons are the distillation of a life centered on art. Parsons, an upper-class New Yorker who found her calling at the 1913 Armory Show, studied sculpture in Paris in the 1920s, drew incessantly all her life, painted quite a bit and exhibited intermittently. Her work seems to have improved after the decline of her famous 57th Street art gallery, which incubated prominent members of the Abstract Expressionist generation and successors like Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin and Richard Tuttle.

In the decade before she died in 1982, at 82, Parsons began cobbling together scraps of lumber, boats and signs that washed up on the beach near her summer house on the North Fork of Long Island. She added unobtrusive touches of color: mostly stripes that waver somewhere between Mondrian and festive war paint, but also circles and dabs, often in response to nail holes or the faded hues from the wood's earlier life.

The resulting works qualify as an endearing yet somehow rigorous folk-modernism. They add to the history of assemblage while veering from abstract to the quaintly architectural or ocean-going and can be marginally but astutely figurative.

These works seem to be the natural culmination for an artist who loved pre-Columbian art and kachina dolls and a dealer who showed dedicated abstract colorists (like Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman and Mr. Kelly) but also more playful and eccentric sorts (like Mr. Tuttle, Anne Ryan, the visionary outsider Forest Bess and Saul Steinberg).

In the end, recycling wood milled by humans and worn down by the sea, Parsons used everything she cherished, and it shows. ROBERTA SMITH