

Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: March 12, 2010

'JOURNEYS'

'The Art of Betty Parsons'

Spanierman Modern 53 East 58th Street

Manhattan

Through March 20

Betty Parsons (1900-1982) has a place in the history of postwar American painting as a facilitator. She opened her gallery in 1946 and within a few years had ushered or helped usher into public view the paintings of Ad Reinhardt, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Richard Pousette-Dart. She would later show Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman, Paul Feeley, Agnes Martin and Richard Tuttle.

Parsons was an artist herself and is known primarily for amalgams of sea-worn wood scraps economically striped with bright colors. Totemic and semaphorelike, these table-top sculptures and wall pieces suggested how Mondrian might have managed if marooned. Parsons often gave them as gifts; they frequently figure in photographs of the homes or studios of the artists she knew.

But Parsons also made paintings, about which she was more circumspect. Since she represented so many prominent artists, perhaps she didn't want to confuse people. This exhibition explains why. With 19 canvases dating from 1955 to 1980 (as well as four sculptures and four gouaches) this is the largest display of Parsons's paintings in New York since the early '80s. It shows that she often seemed to be painting alongside the artists she represented, picking up tips, especially from the stained surfaces of Reinhardt, Newman and Rothko and the concentric colors of Feeley, as well as from African and American Indian art.

But Parsons's paintings handily evade derivativeness. She had a wonderful, implicitly humorous touch that loosened up her borrowings. "Journey" (1975) has the patchiness of Still's surfaces, lightened by stain-painting in pink and ochre; occasional bits of dark green striped with orange suggest plaster and lath peeking through peeling paint. More monochromatic works, like "Copper" (around 1971), have randomly brushy fields broken by little shards of colors within colors for an effect that vacillates between abstraction and cheerfully useless cartography.

Parsons clearly painted noncompetitively, for herself, which may account for the relaxed mood of her canvases. But they are still a vibrant part of the art history of their time, alongside Parsons' groundbreaking gallery. ROBERTA SMITH