

## Betty Parsons: 'A Life in Art'

By ROBERTA SMITH MARCH 19, 2015

This show has a big title for being fairly small: a total of 19 gouaches and painted-driftwood sculptures by Betty Parsons (1900-1982), the revered New York art dealer, advocate of Abstract Expressionism and an artist in her own right. Five of the pieces were seen in a larger show in 2010 at the recently closed Spanierman Gallery. But that show was the first sizable one in New York devoted to Ms. Parsons's work since the 1980s, and who knows when another will come along.

Ms. Parsons made her art on the side in the shadow of the Abstract Expressionists, but she had a more playful, less angsty sensibility not unlike Paul Klee's. She was something of a natural who infused her art with a palpable ease and an instinct for color that was further cultivated by years of travel outside the West.

One or two gouaches here resemble sinuous road maps, while others isolate shapes of color on contrasting grounds, like islands in a sea, or windows in the corner of a room. Inevitably several shapes are finished off with enlivening scribbles that scratch through to reveal contrasting shades beneath.

In the 1970s, Ms. Parsons began working in bits of driftwood collected near her house on the North Fork of Long Island. These she augmented with stripes of color, cobbling them into sculptures and wall pieces that suggest toys, but also boats and buildings. This is especially clear in a work consisting of eight small pieces of weathered board that she striped with paint, stacked up and titled "Indian Memories," which even has a minaret.

Ms. Parsons's awareness of her strengths and limitations as an artist exceeded that of some of her better-known contemporaries, but her place in the expanding history of postwar art has not yet been defined.

David Findlay Jr. Gallery  
724 Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street  
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