

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Legendary Betty Parsons Meets the Not-So-Legendary Betty Parsons

Her reputation as a dealer has conveniently overshadowed her identity as an artist.

John Yau | July 8, 2017



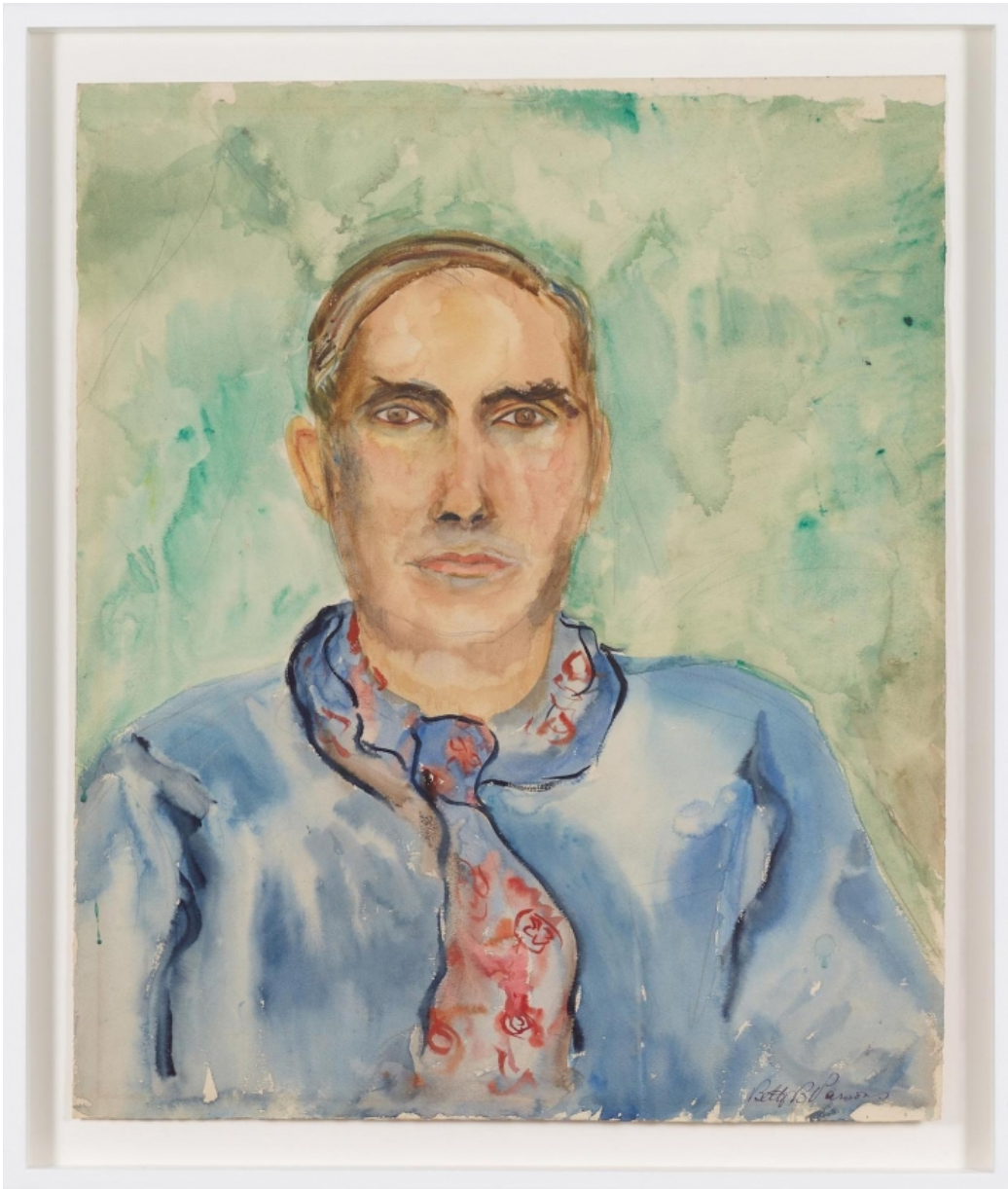
Installation view of “Betty Parsons: Invisible Presence” (2017), Alexander Gray Associates, New York (all images courtesy Alexander Gray Associates)

Betty Parsons (1900-1982) is the legendary dealer who, after opening her gallery in 1946, gave shows to Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and Clyfford Still. For me, she was legendary for different reasons — she showed Forrest Bess, Calvert Coggeshall, Leon Polk Smith, Walter Murch, Ruth Vollmer, Sonja Sekula, and Kenzo Okada — artists who never gained the spotlight in their lifetime. You could see work by the first generation of Abstract Expressionists outside New York in those days, but you had to come to New York to learn about Bess, Coggeshall, and the others. Richard Tuttle, Thomas Nozkowski, and Jack Tilton worked for Parsons, which shows how many different generations she intersected and recognized.

As an artist, Parsons is part of the story that is conveniently overlooked, which puts her in the unenviable position of being both legendary and under the radar. It cannot have been easy,

especially since most of the Abstract Expressionists left her for bigger dealers once they started getting attention.

And yet, long before she opened a gallery, she decided she wanted to be an artist. After seeing the Armory Show when she was 13, she declared, “I am the New Spirit.” When she was 15, she began taking formal art classes. In 1923, she moved to Paris, where she lived for ten years, and studied painting and sculpture. Alberto Giacometti was one of her classmates. Much of Parsons’ intriguing history is recounted in the wall text and supplementary materials accompanying the exhibition [\*Betty Parsons: Invisible Presence\*](#) at Alexander Gray (May 25 – July 14, 2017).



Betty Parsons, “Stuart Davis” (1933), pencil and gouache on paper, 22.63 x 18.88 inches (© Betty Parsons Foundation)

The show, which includes work from the early 1920s until 1981, the year before she died, is fascinating. On the first floor of the gallery, we see work done between 1922 and 1950, around the time she turned away from realism to explore abstraction. In 1933, Parsons did a pencil and gouache portrait of the great early American modernist, Stuart Davis, which should remind you of

just how long she had been around, and how much she had seen by the time she opened her gallery shortly after the end of World War II. At the same time, her commitment to appearance seems old-fashioned because she knew art was going somewhere else.

Opening a gallery in 1946 seems to have liberated Parsons, because everything about her work changed in 1947, when she did a gouache on paper, “The Circle,” which was inspired by her experience of going to a rodeo. At this time, as she moved toward abstraction, her color got more interesting once it did not have to describe what she was looking at. After “The Circle,” she was no longer interested in the appearance of a thing, but in how it made her “feel.” On Alexander Gray’s second floor, we see 13 paintings and two sculptures done between 1954 and 1980, which is to say work based on feeling.



Betty Parsons, “The Circle” (1947), gouache on paper, 16 x 20 inches (© Betty Parsons Foundation)

I had contradictory responses to this exhibition. I wished it were larger, with more emphasis placed on the work she did after 1947. It seems as if the opening of her gallery took away from Parson’s studio time, as well as marked her commitment to abstraction.

I wished that the show conveyed what got her up in the morning. It seems to me that Parsons was a good — if at times, impatient — painter who never found her subject, which I think affects more artists than most people realize. She can certainly paint, but at times I felt that she just didn’t know what to paint. I felt this most intensely with “Victory” (1967), which features a loosely painted chevron (or “V”) descending from the top edge, with its apex extending beneath the bottom edge. Why was she riffing off Kenneth Noland at this late stage of her life?

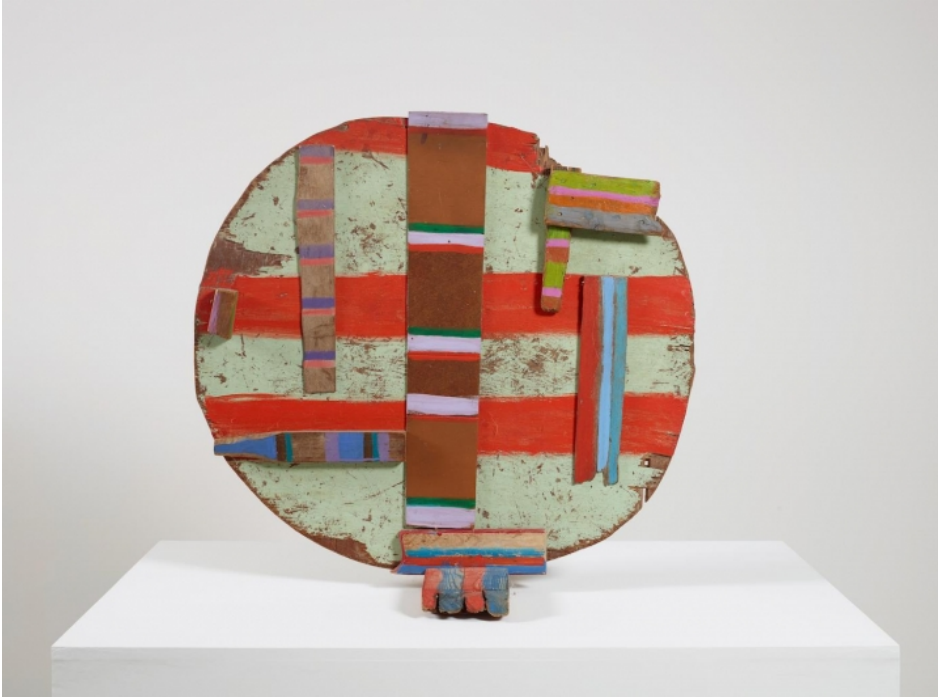


Betty Parsons, "Bird in a Boat" (1971), acrylic on canvas, 60.25 x 48 inches (© Betty Parsons Foundation)

And yet, she does something fresh and whimsical just a few years later in "Bird in a Boat" (1971). In this green painting populated by a handful of dark blue shapes edged with a light blue border, Parsons uses the title to call attention to a shape that looks like the silhouette of a cartoon bird sitting in a cartoon boat. While the title directs the way we read one particular shape in the painting, the others do not yield to our associative powers. I was unexpectedly reminded of Raoul de Keyser. "Maine" (1972) also has some of the same feeling, of abstract shapes based on something in reality, but you have no idea what.

This exhibition reintroduces us to a well-known historical figure whom we do not think of as an artist. It challenges the earlier, widely accepted view of her solely as a dealer. The sculpture "II Oglala" (1979), which was made out of found wood, was surprising. It reminded me of Lakotan and Oglala war shields, as well as talismanic discs. It shared something with the sculpture of Paul Bowen, who for years made work out of the wood he found along the shore in Provincetown, Massachusetts.





Betty Parsons, "Il Oglala" (1979), acrylic on wood, 31 x 33 x 16 inches (© Betty Parsons Foundation)

This, I suppose, is what confused me. In the sculpture, I got the feeling that Parsons believed in magic and shamans, but the paintings seem based on a rational perception. Maybe, in painting, she had to guide the materials, while the found wood guided her. I certainly wished there were more late sculptures, particularly in light of the knowledge that a sculptor was what she originally set out to be. My feeling is that we need to learn more about Parsons the artist, and that this exhibition is the beginning of that process. That's not a bad place to be.

Betty Parsons: Invisible Presence continues at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 14.