Betty Parsons: *Heated Sky*

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Alexander Gray Associates
Betty Parsons’ boundless energy manifested itself not only in her various forms of artistic expression—paintings of all sizes, travel journals, and her eponymous gallery—but in her generosity of spirit. Nearly four decades after Parsons’ death, her family, friends, and former colleagues reinforce this character trait in conversations and interviews I have conducted, in order to better understand the spirit behind her vibrant and impassioned works.

Betty, as I have been told was her preferred way to be addressed, was a woman of many actions despite her reticent nature. She took younger family members under her wing, introducing them to major players in New York’s mid-century art world and showing them the merits of a career in the arts. As a colleague and mentor, she encouraged the artistic practice of gallery assistants and interns. As a friend, she was a constant source of inspiration, often appearing as the subject of portraits and photographs.

Perhaps her most deliberate act of generosity was the one that would extend beyond her lifetime. As part of her will, she established the Betty Parsons Foundation in order to support emerging artists from all backgrounds, and to support ocean life. After her nephew Billy Rayner’s death in 2018, the Foundation was further bolstered to advance her mission. Through a partnership with the Art Matters Foundation, fellowships will be awarded to female-identified artists and support has been given to arts institutions advancing recognition of her own artistic legacy. Betty’s prolific practice necessitates research and ultimately a catalogue raisonné, which is currently in its nascent stages. This chapter in the Foundation’s history, as well as the thesis of the current show Heated Sky, is defined by bringing to the forefront the artistic talents of a woman who championed the careers of others over her own.
Betty Parsons drawing a portrait of Alison Pearson in her Southold, Long Island, NY studio, February 16, 1975
Painting Opacity
By Elizabeth Buhe

Among Betty Parsons’ many self-identifications was that of artist. She once remarked that “my own art is...my greatest joy.” Parsons is also well known for the eponymous gallery she directed with something of a legendary spirit from 1946 until her death in 1982, a vocation that ran parallel to her own artistic practice and which often eclipsed it both in the visibility she attained and in the prosaic fact of daylight hours that remained for studio work. In our current moment of expanding, inclusive art histories, Parsons is an unusual case in that—although her work has become visible to contemporary audiences only in the last decade or so—she is already woven throughout the modernist story, though not for her own art. This essay attempts to think through Parsons’ abstract painting as a means of being and relating by considering its resistance or submission to “looking like” the visual environments that surrounded her. I am interested in her work’s potential to subvert common readings, and in its possibility to disclose at different times, in more or less public and private ways.

First, the artist. Parsons pursued a classical training in fits and starts against the rigid social expectations of her parents, at whose insistence she forewent a university education in favor of finishing school, but only on the condition that they allowed her to enroll in an art class nonetheless. Through the 1920s she studied with sculptors Antoine Bourdelle and Ossip Zadkine in Paris, as well as with Arthur Lindsay, a landscape painter. Her charmed bohemian life as an expatriate artist was cut short after the stock market crash turned her family’s fortunes, so in 1933 Parsons returned to New York via California, where she taught and made sculpture, continuing all the while to paint portraits and sketchbook-sized landscapes in which villages appear across a grassy expanse or tiny white boats bespeak an inviolable sea. Parsons exhibited early and often, with solo shows in Paris, London, and from 1935–58, frequently at Midtown Galleries in New York (where she also worked in sales to sustain her own artistic activity, setting on track her self-styling as a dealer). Although by 1966 she returned to sculpture in the form of roughly stacked wooden constructions painted with bold stripes, it was painting that sustained the arc of her artistic career, and, from 1947 onward, abstract painting in particular.
In those post-1947 years, Parsons made several hundred canvas paintings and even more works on paper (an accurate counting awaits a catalogue raisonné, now in preparation). Across the nine acrylic or oil canvas paintings and four works on paper on view in this exhibition and a roughly equivalent number in this gallery’s inaugural showing of her work in 2017, we can discern certain qualities characteristic of her work. These include: bright, flat colors; slight compositional tilt or asymmetry; clustered, irregular shapes outlined with a contrasting color; an awareness of the framing edge via elongated forms that crawl along it, and/or subtly curved shapes organized roughly alongside but hovering just away from it, as if softly repelled; and fields of paint brushed on decisively in layers and in a uniform direction—seemingly quickly—leaving lower colors or primer exposed between or at the ends of strokes. Finally, and related to this last point, her paint is often opaque in both oil and acrylic, but this is not where my interest in opacity lies. More on that momentarily. These formal attributes appear with rough consistency throughout Parsons’ canvases, indicating an artist who was in command of her materials and who was painting—consciously, habitually, reflexively—within a range of considered choices. By the same token, Parsons’ oeuvre seems to evince a stylistic heterogeneity that does not map especially neatly into periodization. (This is another observation that may stand corrected as the works are catalogued and increasingly shown in the future.) In the early 1950s, we find centered compositions (Walking Bull or The Minotaur, 1954) and busy surfaces “animated in manic profusion,” with forms jammed against each other, overlaid with a freehand sgraffito technique (Untitled, 1950). In the 1960s, the canvases open up, with crisp shapes on fresh expanses of near-monochrome greens and blues, as in Pasture (1963) (page 41), Fourth of July (1964), and Early Light (1965) (page 47). Canvases like these continue well into 1969 (The Moth), the early 1970s, and 1980. Hard-edge stripes predominate and triangles abound in the late 1960s, but the strength of this claim to linearity is lessened by the winding, gaping aperture of a 1967 canvas like Flame. Parsons’ pliability is evident in her sketchbooks, too, where sequential pages indicate her capacity to work, full tilt, in multiple formal modes. In a 1967 sketchbook, for instance, the entwined stems of two open-face flowers stamp out a figure eight against
a mustard ground; on the next page, stacked boxes lodge firmly within the page's perimeter; turn the page again to find a wall of olive browns and greens overlaid with a patchwork of pink and yellow scrawls. These are three very different ways of thinking through and putting down an image. In short, while over time there are certain identifiable shifts in her work, Parsons also seems to have painted recursively, working out a set of possibilities that she always held in play and returning to these modes throughout her career.

Roberta Smith has called this aspect of Parsons' work a “flexible style,” and I am inclined to agree. Hers was a capacious mode of art making, one we might understand as propelled by an attitude of “making do” or improvisation. She worked in snippets, when she could, sketching in the back of cars, on airplanes, and at the zoo, carrying her pastels with her, and painting canvases on weekends or summers, often in her Southold, Long Island studio, when the demands of the gallery had quelled. Others have noted a nimble responsiveness to the contingencies of her environment. Curator Lawrence Alloway recalled that “a geometric zig-zag would be snatched out of a house we glimpsed … blue tatters would record a moment’s weather,” while for an Art News critic, “she paints wherever she happens to be … in New Orleans it was pink color, windows, ironwork; in Venice, columns, arcades.” Parsons' adaptability to her environment affected the conditions in which she painted, and thus affected the paintings.

Yet this one-to-one translation of environment into a painting’s image as suggested by these commentators, however filtered through Parsons’ own artistic sensibility, could not be farther from the party line. According to Parsons, her abstract paintings were pictures of feeling. As such, they are removed from the realm of mimesis or “looking like” the world, upon which the above claims are predicated (the New Orleans pink, the Venetian arcades). Parsons repeatedly defanged mimesis in terms coeval with the origin story of her abstraction (yielding The Circle, 1947), which occurred at a rodeo in 1947 when she became interested not in “what it looked like” but rather in “what it made me feel.” “When I start painting a picture,” she reported on another occasion, “I try to become a blank and only let an emotion come into me … I try to become a blank when it comes to choice of the forms and the colors.” This model of painting as involuntary transmission has a long history, from Surrealist automatism and Abstract Expressionism’s eruption of psychic interiority to neo-dada. Rather than confirming her alignment with these movements’ ideologies or reigning styles, however, we might take Parsons’ insistence on feeling as instruction to ask what else “looking like” might have to tell us, beyond the transposition in paint of colors or forms snatched from the visible world. What I am inching toward is the suggestion that Parsons’ recursiveness, her flexible style, her “making do,” and her insistence on feeling can be understood as a tactical strategy for performing ways of being and relating in the world that engage “looking like” in critical, maybe even subversive, ways. In other words, this would be a strategy of painting as code-switching, queering, non-disclosure, or opacity.

In the foregoing discussion, the distance between Parsons' paintings and “looking like” relates to her environment: the things she saw around her, in whatever locale. Parsons' paintings do not look like the physical world around her, especially since her drawings seem to have served as
midway steps in working out a composition, allowing further degrees of mediation (if and when the drawings correlate to nature in the first place). However laudable Parsons’ ability to work on the go, it presents itself as a necessity, not a considered strategy. For that, we would need to look to another dimension of visual experience in relation to which Parsons navigated her own painting: the work of the artists she admired and showed in her gallery. Commentators have frequently compared Parsons’ paintings to those in her stable (an easy target, after all). Some have also contended that her paintings were mostly “abstract works in the vein of painting to those in her stable.”

During her lifetime, Parsons was quick to refute such claims: “I have absolutely no recall when I get in front of a canvas in spite of the marvelous painters that I didn’t look.”

In this context, “looking like” operates in a different way. Commentators have frequently compared Parsons’ painting to those in her stable (an easy target, after all). Some have also accused her of derivativeness, such as critic Benjamin Genocchio, who contended that her paintings were mostly “abstract works in the vein of the artists she admired and showed in her gallery.”

For the most part, Parsons’ paintings do not look like those of her counterparts—except when they do. We might say this is “looking like with difference.” Abstraction is an appealing language for looking like with difference, and a little-known episode in Parsons’ artistic formation is relevant here. In 1941, six years before her turn to abstraction, Parsons took a class on camouflage taught by Arshile Gorky at the Grand Central School of Art, housed in New York’s Grand Central Station.

Camouflage offers a means of understanding Parsons’ paintings as independent of mimesis, yet still available to “looking like with difference.” Abstraction is an appealing language for looking like with difference. Parsons’ flexible style, her recursiveness, and her adeptness in responding to the contingencies ever shifting around her suggest that looking alike superficially, they retain essential differences.

As far as I know, Parsons did not produce any other paintings similar to Victory; therefore, it also exemplifies Parsons’ flexible style, or her resistance to linear stylistic progression. We might take her flexible style as a critique of the stylistic linearity typified by, say, Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock, two artists who showed at her gallery in the 1940s and 50s. Refusing to grant one mode hierarchy over another challenges Abstract Expressionism’s normative, masculinist progression. Parsons esteemed Hedda Sterne for precisely this reason: “[Sterne] was so intelligent and so sensitive. But she changed all the time… She had many ways; most artists only have one way to go.”

But simply resisting stylistic progression does not seem to be Parsons’ endgame. Adaptation, looking like with difference, camouflage—opacity—were a means of non-disclosure, a means of painting in her own way and for her own reasons without having to answer for them. Perhaps it was even a means of survival, given Parsons’s many intersecting identifications. Disclosure is not compulsory. She once told a reporter that “the secret of life is to become more conscious—everyone finding her or his own truth.”

Was painting her way of answering her own edict? As Parsons acknowledged late in her life, “I agree with what the Greeks say, ‘Truth is too sacred to tell.’ I have a dialogue continually with myself about the truth but I don’t tell it to everybody. [Cautiousness is] a form of self-preservation.” In Parsons’ hands, painting abstractly suits these ends especially well.
My thanks to Dina Murokh, Rachel Vorsanger, and Margaret Ewing for their help with source materials for this essay.

Grace Glueck, "Betty Parsons: The Art Dealer's Art Dealer," in Art History 10. Ann Gibson has argued that the Betty Parsons Gallery countered the norms of Abstract Expressionism in other ways.

Helène Aylon, "Interview with Betty Parsons," Helène Aylon noted that "to Parsons, action painting was energetic and masculine, inseparable from the American Dream." Hyperallergic (July 9, 2017).

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Betsy Parsons measuring a long canvas in her Southold, Long Island, NY studio, January 1979
Betty Parsons drawing a portrait of Alison Pierson in her Southold, Long Island, NY studio, February 16, 1975
Heated Sky, 1976
Right: detail
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2020
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Betty Parsons

Betty Parsons (b.1900, New York, NY – d.1982, Southold, NY) was an abstract painter and sculptor who is best known as a dealer of mid-century art. Throughout her storied career as a gallerist, she maintained a rigorous artistic practice, painting during weekends in her Long Island studio. Parsons’ eye for innovative talent stemmed from her own training as an artist and guided her commitment to new and emerging artists of her time, impacting the canon of twentieth-century art in the United States.

Parsons was drawn to art at an early age when in 1913 she attended the Armory Show in New York City. As she came of age, she became dissatisfied with the traditional models of education and limited occupations for women at the time. Following the dissolution of her marriage to Schuyler Livingston Parsons in 1923, she studied painting and sculpture in Paris at Antoine Bourdelle’s Académie de la Grande Chaumière, learning alongside Alberto Giacometti. Her ten years in Paris centered around the expatriate community of artists and cultural figures, including Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, and Adge Baker, in pursuit of a life in art. Upon her return to the United States in 1933, Parsons continued to create, spending time in California and New York. In 1935, she had her first solo exhibition of paintings at Midtown Galleries, New York, and following this show, she was offered a job installing works and selling paintings on commission, sparking her curatorial interest and developing her professional identity as an art dealer. In 1946, Parsons opened her eponymous gallery in New York, and after the closure of Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in 1947, she inherited Guggenheim’s roster of artists, including Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Clyfford Still. While her gallery’s legacy is closely tied to these leading figures, Parsons also championed a diverse program of artists, showcasing work by women, queer artists, and artists of color, reflecting her liberal and inclusive values and eclectic taste.

While operating her gallery, Parsons continued to make art. Following her formal training as a sculptor and landscape watercolorist, Parsons made a stylistic departure in 1947 when she began to work abstractly to capture what she called “sheer energy” and “the new spirit.” From the late 1940s onward, her paintings conveyed her passion for spontaneity and creative play through impulsive gestural brushstrokes and organic forms. She employed thin layers of vibrant paint, often allowing the surface of the canvas to remain visible. Parsons had a long interest in ancient and ethnographic arts, as well as mystical and non-Western spiritual practices, including meditation. Guided by these interests, she chose to set aside the rigid theoretical framework of contemporary abstraction, allowing instead for expressive improvisation in her paintings.

Throughout her life, Parsons traveled widely in pursuit of new influences, taking frequent trips to Mexico, France, Italy, Africa, and Japan. She meticulously recorded her travels in her journals as watercolors and sketches, and often drew on a sense of place in her work. Beginning in 1959, Parsons would spend more time in Long Island, painting at her home/ studio, designed by the sculptor Tony Smith, perched above the Long Island Sound. Her weekends would be consumed by observing nature, and her art became increasingly saturated with color. In addition to painting, in 1965 she returned to sculpture, making polychrome assemblages of discarded wood and driftwood she collected on the beach. Parsons died in 1982, a year after closing her 57th Street gallery, leaving a multi-faceted legacy as a woman and an artist of the twentieth-century.

Exhibition Checklist

Fog, c.1970
Acrylic on canvas
30h x 24.25w in (76.2h x 61.6w cm)

Untitled, c.1976
Acrylic on paper
24h x 19w x 1.5d in
(60.96h x 48.26w x 3.81d cm)

Untitled, 1976
Acrylic on paper
23.75h x 18w in (60.33h x 45.72w cm)

Untitled, c.1967
Acrylic on canvas
48.75h x 16.75w in (123.83h x 42.55w cm)

Early Light, 1965
Acrylic on canvas
30.75h x 25.63w in (78.11h x 65.09w cm)

Heated Sky, 1976
Acrylic on paper
24h x 20.81w x 1.63d in
(60.96h x 52.86w x 4.13d cm)

Untitled, c.1970
Acrylic on canvas
40h x 49w in (101.6h x 124.46w cm)

Pasture, 1963
Oil on canvas
25h x 30w in (63.5h x 76.2w cm)

Untitled, c.1976
Gouache on paper
23.25h x 18w in (59.06h x 45.72w cm)

June 1971, 1971
Acrylic on canvas
53.5h x 65.75w in
(135.89h x 167.01w cm)

Early Morning, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
50.5h x 48.5w in (128.27h x 123.19w cm)

Untitled, c.1967
Acrylic on canvas
24h x 45.5w in (60.96h x 115.57w cm)

Winter Southold, 1966
Acrylic on canvas
29h x 29w in (73.66h x 73.66w cm)

Other Illustrated Works

Untitled, 1948
Watercolor and graphite on paper
4.83h x 7w in
(12.26h x 17.78w cm)

Untitled, 1950
Gouache on paper
20h x 16w in
(50.8h x 40.64w cm)

Walking Bull or The Minotaur, 1954
Acrylic on canvas
30.75h x 35.50w in
(78.11h x 90.17w cm)

The Moth, 1969
Oil on canvas
68.5h x 74.02w in
(174h x 188w cm)

Flame, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
69.5h x 40.63w in
(176.53h x 103.19w cm)

Venice, 1953
Gouache on paper
14.75h x 20w in
(37.47h x 50.8w cm)

Victory, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
41h x 47w in
(104.14h x 119.38w cm)