

## BETTY PARSONS THE PAINTER

Works by the legendary New York gallerist and early champion of Abstract Expressionism go on show in London

Zoe Pilger, *Frieze*, 1 October 2019



Betty Parsons, *No Squares*, 1970, oil on canvas, 91.4 × 127 cm. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © The Betty Parsons Foundation

In 1977, the American art dealer and artist Betty Parsons appeared on the TV show *About the Arts*. She was 77 years old, stylish in an oversized blue shirt and red trousers, her grey hair chicly bobbed, her manner convivial. She was asked, ‘Has Betty Parsons, dealer, ever shown Betty Parsons, artist?’

‘No, never,’ said Parsons. ‘I never hoped to.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, because it’s too much,’ she went on. ‘You know, it’s embarrassing. It would be embarrassing to me.’

# ALISON JACQUES



Betty Parsons at her studio, undated. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © The Betty Parsons Foundation

It is tempting to force Parsons into the narrative of the overlooked female artist, but the reality is more nuanced. She is famous for her eponymous gallery, which she opened in Manhattan in 1946, and for representing the ‘four horsemen’ of abstract expressionism, as she called them: Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. ‘Back in the ‘40s and ‘50s, there was a hostility that I was up against,’ she told *Art News* in 1979. ‘The abstract world was considered cold because it didn’t have figures. But it had fire, energy, nature, light, space.’

Parsons nurtured the talent of those storied male artists who left her gallery for more money elsewhere when they became successful. But she also nurtured the careers of many female artists, including Agnes Martin, Anne Ryan and Sonia Sekula, before the second wave women’s movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s. And she took every weekend off to make her own art at her beachfront studio in Long Island. She said art was her ‘relaxation’; in other words, she loved it for its own sake.



Betty Parsons, *The Queen of the Circus*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 174 × 92.7 cm. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © The Betty Parsons Foundation

Patrick Ireland, one of the artist aliases of the polymath critic Brian O'Doherty, who was represented by Parsons, said of her, 'It's a peculiar form of masochism to be vastly talented as an artist and to do business as a dealer, but then Betty's grander than being a dealer. Being a dealer is just one expression of her passion for artists and good art.' Was it masochism or simply the need to earn a living?

'The Queen of the Circus', the first exhibition of Parsons' art in London for nearly 40 years, opens at Alison Jacques Gallery this evening. It includes a small selection of abstract paintings, sculptures made of bits of wood found on the beach, gouache works on paper, and memorabilia such as a stone painted with bright circles, which sat on her desk as a talisman for much of her life, and an open notebook, which shows a self-portrait in felt-tip: there is the blue shirt again, the sense of amiability.

Most joyous is the large abstract painting *Seeds* (1970) in acrylic and charcoal; it shows a series of openings, roughly rendered, in dirty sunshine yellow. Much of the background is left empty and white, which is confident. There is a quickness, even an impatience, to these works; Parsons was busy.

# ALISON JACQUES



Betty Parsons, *Maine*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 61 × 76.2 cm. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © The Betty Parsons Foundation

She was also a spiritual person, part of a meditative organization called Subud, which practised a technique that she termed 'surrender'. 'You throw away your body, your mind. You become a vacuum, and the life force enters.' The concept of surrender may be misunderstood by feminism as submission to given social conditions; in this instance, it describes the ancient way to enlightenment.

Parsons was born into a wealthy New York family in 1900. She lost all her money after an early divorce and the Wall Street Crash, and was compelled to make her own living. She was open about her romantic relationships with women. All works included here were made in the last 15 years of her life; she died in 1982.

*Wings* (1977) is an abstract painting of scant white brushstrokes on another empty background. Here a form almost appears, perhaps an angel. Rather than clinical, Parsons was guided by the soulful in abstraction, what she termed the 'invisible presence'.

Some of the most beguiling works are photographs of Parsons doing what she loved: contemplating a painting, or making art on the beach, surrounded by water and stones, or simply walking alone. She appears a woman content to be with herself.

When she was asked what she looked for in new artists' work, Parsons quoted the writer Willa Cather: 'that quality of life'. It is that quality of life, vitality itself, which is most powerfully conveyed here.