

Betty Parsons: 1950s Works on Paper

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Alexander Gray Associates

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November 20 – December 27, 2020

Alexander Gray Associates

Germantown, New York



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Betty Parsons, Southampton, NY (c. 1935)

Evolution of an artist: Betty Parsons' works on paper

By Rachel Vorsanger, Collection and Research Manager
Betty Parsons and William P. Rayner Foundation

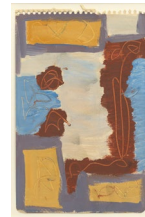
Throughout her storied life, as an artist and artistic influencer and taste-maker, Betty Parsons made drawings. Immediate, portable, intimate and tactile, her works on paper are notable for their sources—impressions of places, people, and experiences—and mark Parsons' personal and artistic evolutions, journeys, and triumphs.

Born into the prominent Pierson family in 1900, the rebellious young Betty Bierne Pierson decided to be an artist after attending the 1913 Armory Show in New York City. She completed her education at the Chapin School in 1916 and, instead of university, agreed to attend the Randall McKeever Finishing School on the condition that she be allowed to take art lessons. The same year Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the right to vote, Parsons attempted to gain her independence through her marriage to Schuyler Livingston Parsons. While ultimately unsuccessful, Parsons' marriage fulfilled the societal expectations of her parents and class. The ill-fated union was dissolved in 1923 when she filed for divorce in Paris, citing grounds of incompatibility.¹

It was in Paris where Parsons found the true freedom she had misguidedly sought in marriage. There, she dedicated herself fully to the practice and pursuit of art. Parsons studied painting and sculpture alongside Alberto Giacometti at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, first with Antoine Bourdelle and later Ossip Zadkine. Sir Arthur Lindsey, a celebrated miniaturist, taught her watercolors. Moving in creative circles, Parsons surrounded herself with figures like Adge Baker, Sylvia Beach, Alexander Calder, Sari Dienes, Gertrude Stein, and Hedda Sterne. This community informed Parsons' understanding of art—and a life fully entrenched in art. Shaped by the geometric rhythms of Cubism and the Surrealist penchant for automatic drawing, Parsons began to hone her approach to composition and form.

Parsons returned to the United States in 1933 after the stock market crash of 1929 greatly reduced her family's wealth and halted the alimony payments she received from her former husband.² After two years of studying sculpture in California with Alexander Archipenko and teaching private classes, Parsons returned to New York where she resolved to become an art world professional.³ While she remained committed to her own artistic practice, she also recognized her keen ability to identify and promote the avant-garde; indeed, in a 1969 interview, she claimed that this was a role she was "destined" to assume.⁴

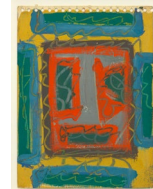
Parsons deepened her rapport with figures from her Paris years, like Alexander Calder, and expanded her network with new colleagues in New York, including Midtown Galleries' founder, Alan Gruskin. Working at the



Untitled, 1953

Wakefield Gallery and then the Mortimer Brandt Gallery as Director, she honed her programmatic vision. In 1946, with the encouragement of Peggy Guggenheim, she opened the Betty Parsons Gallery, exhibiting artists on the forefront of the insurgent Abstract Expressionism movement, including Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. By the 1950s, Parsons and her gallery were at the center of the American post-war avant-garde.

In addition to the art world, Parsons also made her mark, quite literally, upon her works on paper. Her use of sgraffito, creating etchings in wet paint with the wooden end of a paintbrush, is both uninhibited and deliberate in her compositions from the 1950s. Evoking a sense of emotion and purpose, this pictorial gesticulation is the defining element of her works



Stansford, 1951

from this decade. At its beginning, short, thick strokes create condensed forms, as in *Stansford* (1951). Towards its end, however, these lines become fluid and elongated, as in *untitled* (circa the late 1950s). Her progression from hard-pressed markings to lightly-made accents reflects not only Parsons own stylistic evolution as she began to play with pressure and brush grips, but also larger aesthetic developments as the overt bravura of action painting was tempered by the tonal shifts of Color Field Painting.



Maine, 1958

Parsons' interest in Color Field Painting is reflected in *Maine* (1958) and *untitled* (circa late 1950s). These works feature large blocks of pure, primary color—balanced quadrilaterals, symmetrical in their placement and composition. In addition to experimenting with primary colors, Parsons creates bold and surprising contrasts with muted hues. In *untitled* (circa the late 1950s) one can see how Parsons balances this chromatic restraint with her exploration of a circular motif that anchors the composition.

These varying pictorial devices, notable for alternating between intensity and restraint, parallel a time of tumultuous change for her gallery. After championing their works for a handful of years, by 1952, the “Four Horsemen” of Abstract Expressionism (Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still), had left her gallery for more commercial

representation. While this was devastating for Parsons, she adapted, carried on, and ultimately honed her program to better reflect her artistic mission.⁵ On her roster throughout this decade appeared emerging artists, women artists, queer artists, and artists of color, including Forrest Bess, Sari Dienes, Perle Fine, Cleve Gray, José Guerrero, Hans Hoffman, Buffie Johnson, Ellsworth Kelly, Kenzo Okada, Alfonso Ossorio, Day Schnabel, Sonia Sekula, Saul Steinberg, Hedda Stern, and Robert Rauschenberg. With the gallery, Parsons built loyal friendships with artists who appreciated that her talent lay not in her financial acumen, but rather in her fierce advocacy for artistic pluralism, experimentation, and freedom.

In her artistic practice, Parsons deepened her passion for abstraction with her works on paper. Playing with scale, color, composition, and mark-making, these works were personal studies that expressed her conflicted feelings, and life experiences. Often at odds with her public persona—refined, reserved, and measured, befitting her class background—these exuberant images delight in undulating shapes and unexpected juxtapositions in color. Raw and unfiltered, Parsons' 1950s works on paper ultimately reveal the highs and lows she experienced in her professional and private life.

Although Parsons never abandoned her gouaches, the start of the 1960s saw them relegated to notebooks and journals made primarily while traveling. This shift coincided with the construction of her studio and residence, from 1959-1960, by the designer and sculptor Tony Smith. Located in Southold, Long Island, this new dedicated workspace was separate from her professional life and proved to be a catalyst for Parsons' art-making practice. Throughout the 1960s, her art expanded to painted works on canvas on a large and ambitious scale.

The artist's works on paper from the 1950s have a unique resonance within her oeuvre. They provided a forum for experimentation and expression, for many of their pictorial devices echo throughout works made later in Parsons' life. During a pivotal decade in art history—one which entrenched the New York School into the modernist canon—these pieces chart the complex inner workings of a pioneering gallerist and artist at the center of artistic innovation.

1 Historical note from the Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

2 Lee Hall, *Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 44-45.

3 Betty Parsons résumé, 1946, Box 39, Folder 5, Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

4 Oral history interview with Betty Parsons, 1969 June 4–9. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 4.

5 Parsons quoted in Grace Lichtenstein, “The Remarkable Betty Parsons,” *ARTnews*, March, 1979.



Betty Parsons
1950s Works on Paper

exhibition continues next door in barn

Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Maine, 1958



Untitled, 1952



Stanford, 1951



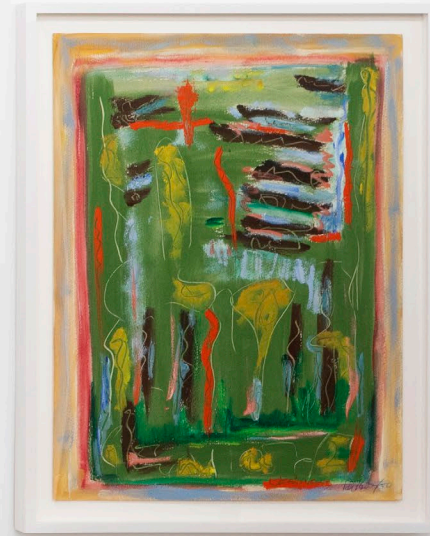
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Untitled, 1958



Untitled, 1953



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Untitled, 1950



Undersea #2, 1956



Untitled, 1950



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Untitled, c. late 1950s



Untitled, c. 1951



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY (2020)



Untitled, c. mid 1950s



Untitled, c. 1953

Betty Parsons
1950s Works on Paper

exhibition continues next
door on garden level





Untitled, 1980

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 by creating works in a variety of media including paintings, sculpture, and works on paper. Parsons' eye for innovative talent stemmed from her own artistic training, and her commitment to championing new and emerging artists of her time impacted the canon of twentieth-century art in the United States.

Parsons realized her passion for art early in life when she attended the 1913 Armory Show in New York City. As she entered adulthood, however, she experienced the educational and professional limitations that faced women of her era. Tenaciously maintaining her desire to study art in all its forms, Parsons took lessons with artists in New York City throughout finishing school and during her three-year marriage to Schuyler Livingston Parsons. Upon its dissolution in 1923, Parsons moved to Paris and stayed for ten years to dedicate herself fully to the pursuit of art. At the Academie de la Grande Chaumière, she studied painting and sculpture first with Antoine Bourdelle and later Ossip Zadkine, alongside fellow student Alberto Giacometti. Through her expatriate community of friends and cultural figures—including Sylvia Beach, Gertrude Stein, and Adge Baker—Parsons continued her artistic education outside the classroom. She joined Baker in studying watercolor with Sir Arthur Lindsey and spent summers with them painting en plein air along the Brittany coast.

After returning to the United States in 1933, Parsons continued to create art both in California and New York. In 1935, she had her first solo exhibition of paintings at Midtown Galleries, New York. She then accepted a position there, installing works and selling paintings on commission which began to establish her professional identity as an art dealer.

Parsons opened her eponymous gallery in New York in 1946. 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. Although the legacy of the Betty Parsons Gallery is closely tied to these leading figures, Parsons showcased work by women, queer artists, and artists of color. Her diverse program reflected her liberal, inclusive values, and her profound sense of community.

While running her gallery, Parsons' artistic practice was an ever-present constant. She began to render abstract works in the late 1940s in order to capture what she called "sheer energy" and "the new spirit." Stylistically departing from her training as a sculptor and landscape artist, her paintings conveyed a passion for spontaneity and creative play through impulsive gestural brushstrokes and organic forms. She often applied thin layers of paint to allow for the canvas to remain visible,



Betty Parsons in her New York apartment (c. mid 1930s)

elevating its function from material to pigment. In addition, she employed the sgraffito technique and scratched off the top layer of paint in select areas. Departing from verisimilitude, Parsons described this shift as an effort to capture not what a place or event "looked like, but what it made [her] feel."

Throughout her life, Parsons traveled to various international locales, including Mexico, France, Italy, Africa, and Japan, to satiate her curiosity about the wider world around her. She prolifically recorded these trips as watercolors, sketches, drawings, and other entries in visual journals that number into the hundreds. The undulating brushstrokes and non-naturalistic pigmentation of these works show Parsons' experimentation with these and other means to convey her distinctive sense of place.

Parsons commissioned designer and sculptor Tony Smith to construct her studio/residence in Southold, Long Island. After its completion in 1960, Parsons frequently traded the metropolis of New York City for the quiet of the Long Island Sound. Surrounded by nature in a creative haven of her own, her artistic output became more prolific and diverse. In addition to works on canvas—some of which she painted outside on the beach—Parsons began creating sculptures composed of driftwood she collected while walking along the shore. These painted wooden assemblages can be seen as amalgamations of her passion for sculpture, mastery of color, and connection to nature.

In 1977, Parsons coined the phrase “invisible presence” to describe the energy she experienced in any given setting, an energy that she attempted to capture in all forms of her artwork. This belief in an unseen force is a nod to her practice of non-Western spiritualism, including meditation, and her interest in mysticism and indigenous American art. Rather than subscribing to a rigid theoretical framework in both personal and artistic beliefs, Parsons’ abstraction allowed for expressive improvisation in her paintings, assemblages, and diaries. Her aesthetic development was not a linear progression, but rather one in which she established and then revisited artistic devices throughout her career.

By the time of her death in 1982, Betty Parsons had created a multi-faceted legacy that extended beyond her successful gallery career. Her activism took the form of championing women and other marginalized artists of her time as well as advocating for the health and preservation of our oceans. With her diverse exhibition history and unique artistic vision, she established herself as an artist in her own right and was an influential force in the art of the mid-twentieth century. A digital catalogue raisonné of her work is in production by the Betty Parsons and William P. Rayner Foundation.

Betty Parsons’ work has been the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions at Art Omi, Ghent, NY (2018); The Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY (1992); the Montclair Museum of Art, NJ (1974); Whitechapel Gallery, London, United Kingdom (1968), and The Miami Museum of Modern Art, FL (1963). Parsons’ work is represented in prominent public collections including The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; The Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY; Guild Hall, East Hampton, NY; the Montclair Museum of Art, NJ; and The High Museum, Atlanta, GA; among others.

Exhibition Checklist

Maine, 1958
Gouache on paper
7 1/16 x 5 1/4 in (17.9 x 13.3 cm)
14 5/8 x 12 7/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(37.1 x 32.7 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP139)

Untitled, 1952
Gouache on paper
8 1/8 x 9 in (20.5 x 22.7 cm)
15 3/4 x 16 1/2 x 1 5/8 in framed
(39.8 x 41.9 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP128)

Stansford, 1951
Gouache on paper
6 3/4 x 5 in (17.1 x 12.7 cm)
14 1/4 x 12 5/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(36.2 x 31.9 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP105)

Untitled, 1958
Gouache on paper
7 3/4 x 5 7/16 in (19.7 x 13.8 cm)
15 3/8 x 13 x 1 5/8 in framed
(38.9 x 33 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP122)

Untitled, 1953
Gouache on paper
7 15/16 x 5 in (20.2 x 12.7 cm)
15 1/2 x 12 5/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(39.2 x 31.9 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP051)

Untitled, 1950
Gouache on paper
20 x 16 in (50.8 x 40.64 cm)
22 7/8 x 19 x 1 5/8 in framed
(58.1 x 48.3 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP155)

Undersea #2, 1956
Gouache on paper
20 1/8 x 15 11/16 in (51.1 x 39.9 cm)
23 1/8 x 18 5/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(58.7 x 47.3 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP192)

Untitled, 1950
Gouache on paper
23 11/16 x 17 3/4 in (60.2 x 45.1 cm)
26 3/4 x 20 3/4 x 1 5/8 in framed (67.9 x 52.7 x
4.1 cm framed)
(BP116)

Untitled, c. late 1950s
Gouache on paper
7 1/16 x 5 1/4 in (17.9 x 13.3 cm)
12 7/8 x 14 5/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(32.5 x 37.1 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP107)

Untitled, c. 1951
Gouache on paper
10 5/16 x 8 1/16 in (26.2 x 20.5 cm)
17 7/8 x 15 5/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(45.4 x 39.7 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP136)

Untitled, c. mid 1950s
Gouache on paper
13 13/16 x 10 13/16 in (35.1 x 27.5 cm)
21 3/8 x 18 3/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(54.3 x 46.7 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP156)

Untitled, c. 1953
Gouache on paper
13 7/8 x 10 3/4 in (35.2 x 27.3 cm)
21 3/8 x 18 3/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(54.3 x 46.7 x 4.1 cm framed)
(BP131)

Untitled, 1980
Signed and dated on verso
Acrylic on wood
34 x 14 1/2 x 3 in
(86.36 x 36.83 x 7.62 cm)
(BP403)

Published by Alexander Gray Associates on the occasion of the exhibition

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November 20 – December 27, 2020

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Cover image: *Stansford*, 1951, gouache on paper, 6 3/4 x 5 in (17.1 x 12.7 cm)

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Alexander Gray Associates is a contemporary art gallery in New York City and Germantown NY. Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, the Gallery spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is an organization committed to anti-racist and feminist principles. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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