

Press Release

Betty Parsons: The Queen of the Circus

2 October – 9 November 2019

Private View: Tuesday 1 October, 6pm - 8pm



Betty Parsons, *The Queen of the Circus*, 1973.
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Alison Jacques Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of works by Betty Parsons (1900 - 1982), one of the most influential and dynamic figures of the American avantgarde.

As the first show of her work to be held in London for nearly forty years, following important exhibitions at the Whitechapel Gallery (1968) and Nigel Greenwood Gallery (1980), it offers a deeper understanding of Parsons' unique career as an artist which has too often been overshadowed by the pioneering gallery she opened in New York in 1946.

The paintings and sculptures Parsons produced during her six-decade career formed part of a rigorous and experimental artistic practice that centred on abstraction and drew on diverse sources, from natural phenomena and the cosmos, to Native American culture and Asian spiritual practices. Her adventurous character resulted in extensive international travel, including trips to Africa, Japan and Mexico, which had a profound impact on her relationship with colour and form.

Parsons' contribution to post-war abstraction was unique; she developed a style that was playful, bold and expressive, and always grounded by a flair for colour. The show offers a survey of the artist's career from 1951 to 1981, highlighting a number of key paintings from this period alongside a group of wood constructions.

Born into a prominent New York family, Parsons resolved to be an artist after visiting the infamous Armory Show in 1913 - an exhibition that is often credited with introducing Modern art to the United States. Following classes at Parsons School of Design, her training evolved after relocating to Paris in 1922. During her decade in France she studied alongside Alberto Giacometti under the tutelage of Antoine Bourdelle. Upon her return to America, she continued her studies with Alexander Archipenko in Los Angeles before moving back to New York, where she was taught by Arshile Gorky at the Grand Central School of Art.

After a decade of schooling, supported by an intensive studio practice, Parsons began to receive solo exhibitions at the beginning of the 1930s. To supplement her income she took jobs assisting art dealers in Manhattan. This resulted in Parsons being invited to run her own space. The opening of the Betty Parsons Gallery in September 1946 generated important early exhibitions for Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, Clyfford Still and Jackson Pollock, at a time when there was little interest in new American painting. Parsons is credited with launching the careers of several other artists over the course of the gallery's thirty-six-year history, including Hedda Sterne, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly and Helen Frankenthaler.

Despite the great success of her gallery, Parsons possessed an unwavering commitment to her artistic practice. "When I'm not at the gallery, my own art is my relaxation," she once said. "That's my greatest joy."

Her painting practice significantly changed direction during this period. From 1947 she transitioned from making representational, small-scale watercolours and oil works, to large, gestural, acrylic compositions. Similarly, her motivation to create an image was replaced by a desire to capture a feeling. The impulse to evoke what she described as the "sheer energy" of a situation would continue to frame her artistic ambitions until the end of her life.

In the mid-1970s Parsons added sculpture to her practice. Inspired by the landscape surrounding her Long Island studio, she would collect wooden flotsam found on the beach and transform these forgotten objects into small constructions that can be likened to mementos, buildings and masks. This environment also impacted on Parsons' life-long passion for writing poetry. Her sketchbooks, some of which are included in the exhibition, were brimming with poems that appeared alongside watercolours of the coastal landscape.

Parsons' skill for recognising talent and nurturing the careers of other artists often overtook the attention she sought for her own art. Although acclaimed by leading critics from this era, such as Lawrence Alloway and Clement Greenberg, Parsons was not able to supersede her powerful status as a gallerist. Her 1974 retrospective at Montclair Art Museum, which followed the first international survey of her work at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1968, took the American media by surprise as it was still not widely known that Parsons was a painter and sculptor. "I would give up my gallery in a second if the world would accept me as an artist," she is known to have remarked.

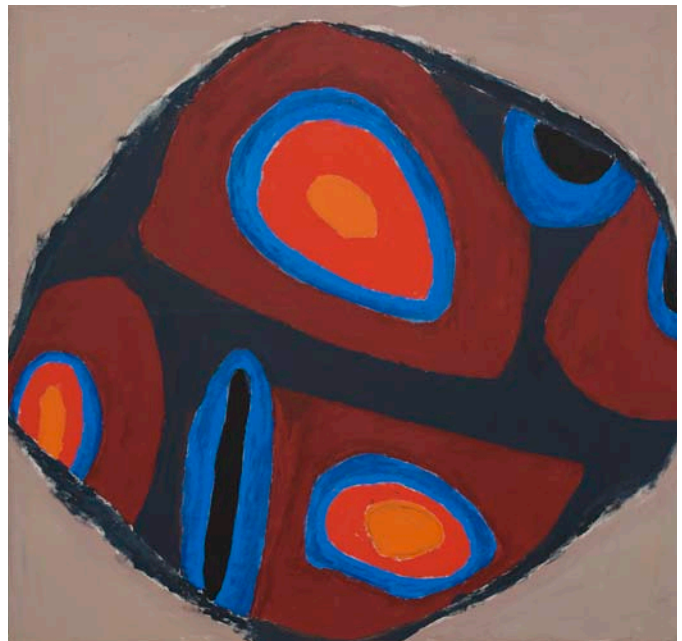
Parsons' work is held in many American museum collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; and the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC. Her bold and energetic works form a critical component of her legacy - one that is now being rediscovered and fully recognised in Europe.

For press enquiries, contact Sam Talbot: sam@sam-talbot.com

For more information about Alison Jacques Gallery, contact Allie Biswas, Head of Content and Research: allie.biswas@alisonjacquesgallery.com



Betty Parsons, *Block House*, 1970-1979. © The Betty Parsons Foundation



Betty Parsons, *Midnight Flute*, 1968. © The Betty Parsons Foundation