

Esther Schipper

Sojourner Truth Parsons

If nobody wants you you're free

June 8 – July 6, 2023



Sojourner Truth Parsons, **Life knows how to live here**, 2023. Photo © Jörg von Bruchhausen

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce Sojourner Truth Parsons solo exhibition **If nobody wants you you're free**, the artist's first with the gallery. On view will be all new paintings.

The vividness of everyday-life experiences but also the strangeness of existence are at the basis of Sojourner Truth Parsons' work. With their intermingling bright colors, silhouetted bodies, and black fields doubling as architectural markers and framing devices, Parsons' paintings have an astounding atmospheric intensity. Her compositions hover at the threshold of abstraction and representation, swinging back and forth as recognizable shapes such as bodies, flowers, city blocks or landscapes never fully settle in one register or the other. Composed from overlapping elements—layers of paint alternate with thin washes, matt surfaces with slightly glossier and iridescent passages—the artist's iconography constructs an interior environment, more psychic landscape than forest or city block, embodying emotional truth.

Urban landscape of skyscrapers, slivers of river views, and window frames entered Parsons' work after her move to New York from Los Angeles in 2018. The new paintings on view in **If nobody wants you you're free** are informed by her extended stays in rural Upstate New York and show the artist's renewed engagement with nature. **Speed of earth**, 2023, for example, creates a rhythmic pattern from black verticals with irregular curved and deeply incised edges that recall tree trunks or carved logs. To the artist the work encapsulates a fleeting but profound impression: the sensation of being in a frozen landscape, the prickliness of its icy shapes and its crackling sounds.

Sometimes the association with the outside world is anchored simply by a luminous round disc—sun or moon—that lets the painting shift between abstraction and representation at the blink of an eye. Or gentle

slopes and upturned curves can suddenly manifest their eroticism before retreating again into a compositional whole of abstracted pattern. Yet other works play on memories of looking, approximating for example the sensation of a picture becoming smaller, spiraling, and capture such visual effects as lived experience.

Parsons' paintings integrate influences that include post-World War II art practices but also an abstraction fueled by the vernacular and other traditions of object-making. Her work is informed by the appropriation of collage techniques which have left traces in her paintings process, compositional structure and formal vocabulary. References to the communal activities of African American quilt making in the American South provide an entry to the charged subtext emerging from Parsons' abstracted scenes. Especially Alabama's Gee's Bend quilt making with its uneven shapes and kaleidoscopic central vortices, but also its ethos of resourcefulness and community remains a point of reference.

Color in Parsons' paintings can signal formal and emotional associations: brighter ones, such as hot pink and bright reds may refer to the unreality of artificial lights in an urban setting, a sunset framed by Manhattan's skyline or indicate a bright summers day. And while the browns found in several of the new paintings suggest woody terrain, the bright greens have springtime make its way into a wintry landscape. A suite of 15 small canvases explores a near monochrome palette, employing shades of black produced through changes in viscosity and shine, recalling the black-on-black paintings by Ad Reinhardt.

Yet, compositional structure and color have a wider significance in Parsons' practice. As the artist noted in 2022, "I find edges really beautiful. When I'm experiencing the world, I can't help but see everything as an edge, as a color next to a texture next to a flatness. And as a white-passing person of color, that 'edgeness' has been part of the way that I've moved through the world interpersonally, my whole life. On an edge."

Sojourner Truth Parsons (b. 1984 Vancouver, Canada) is an artist of Afro-Indigenous and settler heritage. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Parsons was artist in residence at Denniston Hill (2021), the Santa Fe Art Institute, Canada Council for the Arts International Residencies, Santa Fe (2014), Terra Nova National Park, The Rooms, Newfoundland (2014), and the Ross Creek Center for the Arts, Bay of Fundy (2009).

Solo exhibitions include: **Sojourner Truth Parsons: Holding Your Dog At Night**, Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Canada (2017); recent group exhibitions are: **Summer '22**, Esther Schipper, Berlin (2022); **The New Bend**, curated by Legacy Russell, Hauser & Wirth, Somerset (2023) Los Angeles (2022), and New York (2022); **L'Invitation au voyage**, Esther Schipper, Berlin, Germany (2021); **This is America**, Kunstraum Potsdam, Potsdam (2021); **This Sacred Vessel (PT. 1)**, Arsenal Contemporary, New York (2020).

Parsons' work is included in the collections of Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar; The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal; and Long Museum, Shanghai.