

Press Release

BETTY PARSONS

20 March – 27 April 2024

Preview: Tuesday 19 March, 6-8pm



Betty Parsons, *Circles*, 1967 © The Betty Parsons Foundation

I've always been fascinated with what I call 'the invisible presence'. The most permanent thing in this world is the invisible; you never get away from it.

Betty Parsons, Interview reproduced in Judith Stein and Helène Aylon, 'The Parsons Effect', *Art in America*, 11 November 2013

Alison Jacques is pleased to announce our second solo exhibition of American artist Betty Parsons (1900 – 1982). This exhibition showcases over thirty years of Parsons' practice, covering the period from 1950 until 1981. The show includes paintings on canvas and paper, as well as sculpture.

'I knew about painting because I was a painter', Parsons once remarked of her career as one of New York's leading gallerists.¹ Parsons' prowess as founder and director of Betty Parsons Gallery (1946-1983) has long obscured an appreciation of her own artistic endeavours. While her discerning eye helped launch the careers of many notable artists, including Agnes Martin and Jackson Pollock, Parsons maintained a rigorous commitment to her own practice. 'When I'm not at the gallery, my own art is my relaxation', she once said. 'That's my greatest joy'.² 'I would give up my gallery in a second if the world would accept me as an artist'.³

Parsons' practice was concerned largely with the exploration of colour. Her paintings can be characterised through their large, sinuous swathes of colour that playfully interact, punctuating her saturated canvases. Much like other works included in this exhibition, the forms that feature in *Summer Fire* (1959) do not possess hard, defined edges, but rather stand apart from one another through drastic changes in tonality: an almost fluorescent orange glows in the centre of the canvas, the vibrancy of this inclusion amplified by the subtler greens, greys and blues that surround it. Parsons' use of the grattage technique, etching into her painterly surface, reveals more streaks of orange even in places the colour has been painted over. For Parsons, the bold colours that feature in works such as *Snake Plant* (1975) and *Fun* (1974) had the ability to infuse forms with a sort of kinetic energy. Her move towards abstraction was in part influenced by her experience of attending a rodeo in the mid-1940s: 'I saw all the movement, the noise, the colour, the excitement, the passion. I thought, my God, how can you ever capture this except in an abstract sense?'¹⁴

Parsons' paintings reflect a desire to convey a *sheer energy*; she was particularly interested in the principles of the auratic, and what she termed the *new spirit*. Her instinct for colour was something cultivated during years of travel; her trips to Japan, Africa and Mexico greatly inspired her painterly practice. Parsons' titles often hint at the subjects included in her works, which the artist's abstract configurations alone do not communicate. *Found Forms* (1978), for instance, flatly renders an assortment of shapes using thick bands of individual colour that become hand-sized objects upon discovery of the title. The bullseyes that make up *Circles* (1967) are also surrounded by abstracted curves painted in the same tone, part and whole seen within a single frame.

Incorporated alongside paintings on canvas, this exhibition also includes a selection of Parsons' paintings and drawings on paper and newsprint. These works bring a diaristic perspective to Parsons' corpus: Parsons was known to urgently open her sketchbook in order to document the energy she experienced in specific locations and times, abstractly capturing a moment as one might ordinarily do with a photograph. A playful immediacy is palpable in these works. Drawings such as *Seed Pods* (1968) and *Cocoon* (1968) exemplify Parsons' experimental groupings of colour and shape; such is emphasised by the visibility of the white paper underneath and between her pen marks. A similar technique is implemented in her acrylic on paper works, where Parsons' visible brushstrokes communicate a sense of movement and speed, leaving behind pockets of bright white that create a visual dynamism to the compositions. The intimate scale of these works offers a more personal insight into Parsons' practice.

Parsons returned to sculpture in 1965, which had been one of the artist's first mediums. She experimented with elements of found material such as driftwood, signage, and disassembled furniture that she collected from the beach near her home. Once assembled into shapes reminiscent of buildings, toys or masks, Parsons treated these assemblages with paint in the same way she would a canvas, covering the items in blocks of pigment or using gestural lines, as can be seen in works like *Beach Police* (1968) and *Flight* (1981). Such a process gave new life to these forgotten objects that now seem to carry the weight of mementos; these

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sculptures are indelibly connected to Parsons' deep interest in the mysticism contained within Native American craft and artistic production.

The small scale of Parsons' sculptures has abetted a comparison to 'domestic objects' or 'knick-knacks', a disparaging dismissal of Parsons' significance as a female artist.⁵ By showcasing Parsons' entire oeuvre, this exhibition spotlights Parsons' multimodal practice, and calls for a redress of Parsons' significance in both narratives of the time period and in the contemporary. The latter is reinforced by Parsons' inclusion within recent exhibitions at Whitechapel Gallery, London (2023), and museum acquisitions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, among others internationally.

For further information:

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Notes:

1. Betty Parsons cited in Edith Newhall, 'A Portrait of the Artist... and the Dealer and the Bon Vivant', *Art Beat*, 13 May 1991, p.29.
2. Betty Parsons, interview in *Art in America*, 1977.
3. Betty Parsons cited by Richard Tuttle in *The Painted Sculpture of Betty Parsons* (Naples, FL: Naples Museum of Art, 2005).
4. Betty Parsons cited in Ken Kelley, 'Betty Parsons Taught America to Appreciate What It Once Called "Trash"', *People*, February 1978.
5. David Frankel, 'Review: Betty Parsons Spanierman Modern', *Artforum*, December 2008.