

BETTY PARSONS PAINTINGS

NOVEMBER 6 - DECEMBER 6, 1966

Opening Nov. 6 at 8 P. M.

New Gallery
Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont

INTRODUCTION

To Paul Feeley:

It was in California in 1947 (convalescent at the house of Wright Luddington in Beverly Hills) that Betty Parsons discovered abstract art. She calls it a 'revelation'. Before this time her sketchbooks were filled with peremptory topographies and figure studies, derived from wherever she was staying, and with whom. In fact, her abstract paintings continue as a record of coasts and country; soft wedges of color which used to signify Dufy-esque sailboats in the bay, have become scatters of pure color across a solid field.

Betty Parsons' paintings have a kind of informality that is unexpected in abstract art, either because of its early 20th century desire for purity (excluding particulars) or because of its reductive tendency at mid-century. The first time I met her gave me a clue as to the occasional nature of her art. We were driving to Bennington to see the Barnett Newman exhibition of 1958 and as we crossed New York state she was drawing and drawing, with pastels in a small sketchbook. A geometric zig-zag would be snatched out of a house we glimpsed; smudges of brown were suggested by a hillside; blue tatters would record a moment's weather; a white would be suggested by a duck in a pond. As the diverse marks joined in the sketchbook they would be, not descriptive of any one scene, but evocative of place, light, weather generally. Most of her paintings, extended from such sketches, carry oblique references to season, climate, time, landscape color.

Her way of living is mobile; at the very least she alternates between New York and the North Shore of Long Island, but the journeys are often much more. As I write, she in the USSR and in a postcard she writes: 'Leningrad beautiful, Moscow mad.' The paintings are the analogue of this impulsive, peripatetic, hasty style of life.

The most characteristic form of her paintings of the 1960s, the period covered by the present exhibition, is related to the

scatter-effect referred to above. Sometimes it takes the form of shards strewn at random; in other works, it appears as an archipelago, with atolls of color implying veiled connections. These chains or clusters have easy lyrical associations, which the artist confirms in titles like *Oriental Memories*, *Kites*, *Mid-Winter*, *Summer Glow*, *Winter at Southold*. The allusive mode of her abstractions can be clarified by quoting a poem from a sketchbook of last year, written at Southold, her summer place:

You will write in stone;
 I will leave my bones upon the shore.
 The waves
 The waves
 For ever more
 The wind will take the message to a door.

Betty Parsons' art, then, though abstract, rests on a basic assumption of art as life's running companion. A moment of life equals a painting. In this respect, her early landscape drawings, done on the move, are like her later abstract paintings, in which she still works fast and on the move. Her best paintings are usually not the ones worried over most.

In 1964 she switched from oils to acrylics and by the following year her paintings take on a harder surface and color. At the same time, a crisp patterning developed which, though implicit in some early works (not in the exhibition), remained secondary. Stripes, flashes, blocks, and compartments have a new importance in her imagery, though characteristically they are still related by the artist to an external source (titles: *Blue Light*, *Red Light*). This mood of geometric cheer is very different from the lyrical moodiness of the 1960-65 paintings. However, it is too early to do more than indicate the shift by a few canvases; the burden of her work so far is on her imagery of islands of color.

Lawrence Alloway

1. WITHOUT GREED	1960	49 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 40
2. KITES	1961	38 x 79
3. ORIENTAL MEMORIES	1961	36 x 79
4. NIGHT	1962	40 x 47 $\frac{1}{2}$
5. NIGHT PASSAGE	1962	52 x 41
6. NORTH	1962	70 x 79
7. FRAGMENTS	1962	69 x 25
8. ORANGE	1962	40 x 49 $\frac{1}{2}$
9. REQUIEM	1963	41 x 53 $\frac{1}{2}$
10. THREE O'CLOCK	1963	40 x 42
11. EARTH OBJECTS	1963	40 x 32
12. FALL	1964	30 x 39 $\frac{1}{2}$
13. BURNT ORANGE	1964	30 x 39 $\frac{1}{2}$
14. EARTH 1	1964	30 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 24
15. SUMMER GLOW	1965	42 x 23
16. EARTH 2	1965	40 x 49
17. SUN	1966	40 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 69 $\frac{1}{2}$
18. BLUE LIGHT	1966	20 x 16
19. BY THE SEA	1966	24 x 24
20. BARREL	1966	40 x 30
21. SUN CELEBRATIONS	1966	27 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$
22. RED LIGHT	1966	17 x 23
23. TORCH	1966	70 x 24
24. BRILLIANT DAY	1966	47 x 62













