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Betty Parsons: *An Expanded World*

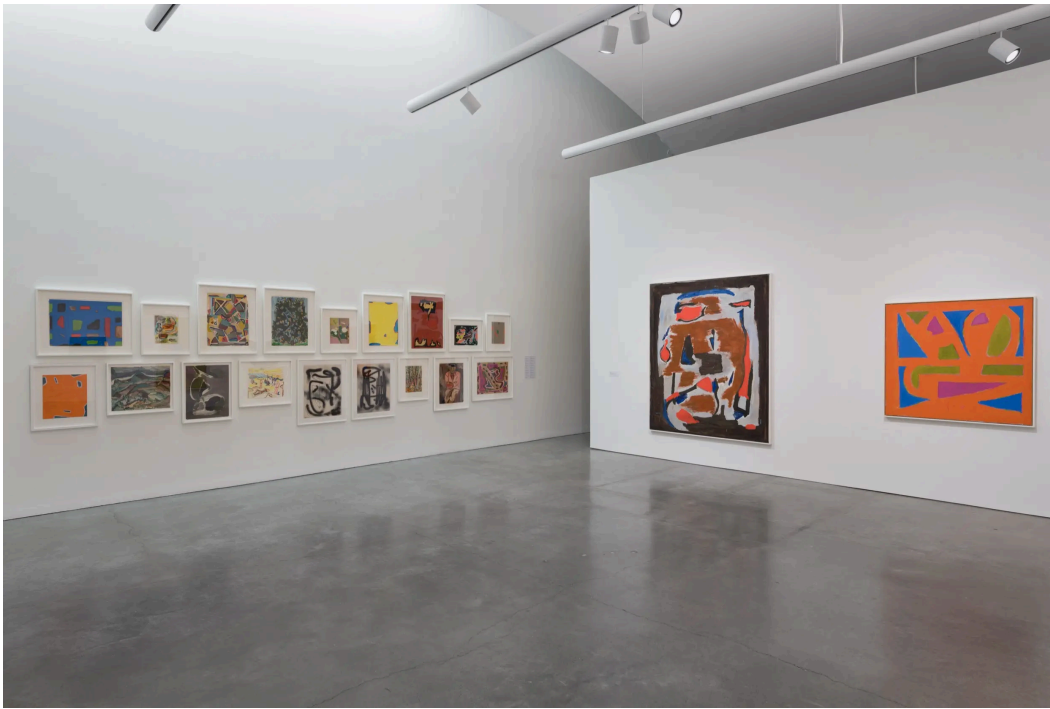
By Charles Duncan



Installation view: *Betty Parsons: An Expanded World*, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, 2026. Photo: Carter Seddon, 2026.

The exhibition *Betty Parsons: An Expanded World* at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College's Hessel Museum of Art showcases Parsons's achievements as an artist, framed within her inescapable status as a legendary American gallerist. Parsons used the term "expanding world" to mark her breakthrough from realism to abstraction during the late 1940s, as well as to express her own sense of manifest destiny: "I was always looking for the expanding world, in a way, which is a very American world. The European world; everything is surrounded by walls. In America everything is wide opened." In this spirit, the exhibition's co-curators, curator Kelly Taxter and artist Amy Sillman, have assembled an expansive survey of Parsons's art practice, complemented by two well-paced ten-minute films by G. Anthony Svatek and Kaija Siirala that detail her personal and professional trajectories. Taken as a whole, *An Expanded World* offers a timely and detailed view into the world of Betty Parsons and her artmaking.

Betty Parsons: An Expanded World
CCS Bard Galleries
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Installation view: *Betty Parsons: An Expanded World*, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, 2026. Photo: Carter Seddon, 2026.

The exhibition smartly opens with a moving-image encapsulation of Parsons's storied work as an art dealer. From its outset, the Betty Parsons Gallery encouraged collaboration with artists like Barnett Newman, steadfastly maintaining an artist-engaged orientation. As a gallerist, Parsons relied on her well-trained eye, patrician decorum, and new world practicality to shape the careers of groundbreaking artists from Ad Reinhardt to Robert Rauschenberg to Agnes Martin. Today her fame is inextricably tied to the pivotal years of Abstract Expressionism, especially as embodied by her so-called "giants": Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Newman. Yet critical interest increasingly acknowledges the diversity that energized Parsons's enterprise. As a gallerist, she represented many artists other than the straight men she is most commonly associated with, including women like Lee Krasner, Ethel Schwabacher, and Perle Fine, as well as LGBTQ+ artists like Bradley Walker Tomlin, Theodoros Stamos, and Sonja Sekula. Parsons herself was queer (her early partner and artistic mentor was Anglo-Irish painter Adge Baker), and *An Expanded World* works hard to marry Parsons the person with the unique success of her gallery.

The main stage of *An Expanded World* concentrates on Parsons the artist, commencing with realist works on paper from the 1920s and ending with late abstract paintings and wooden constructions of the '80s. Parsons practiced art from the time she visited the famed Armory Show in 1913, and during the 1930s she worked in a vein consistent with American Scene painting. Her breakthrough to abstraction occurred when attempting to capture the dynamism of a rodeo in the American West, but her day-to-day intimacy with formidable modernist canvases by Still, Leon Polk Smith, Jack Youngerman, and others helped to refine her work, most notably in terms of compositional structure. Parsons ultimately distilled and refashioned these influences to successfully arrive at a place of her own. In *Bird in a Boat* (1971), for example, would-be hard-edge abstraction becomes soft and lyrical; here, a flattened landscape is energized by keen color combinations and balanced organic shapes.



Betty Parsons, *Bird in a Boat*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas 60 1/8 x 48 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2025 Betty Parsons and William P. Rayner Foundation.

By the 1960s and '70s, Parsons was confidently in command of a practice that also included painted sculptural assemblages fashioned from discarded pieces of wood and other found objects. Her painting found full expression in canvases that used color to structure composition, and she often varied her approaches to brushwork as she experimented with transitions between forms. For Parsons, making art generally took place at her weekend home in Southold, Long Island, which was designed by Tony Smith and served as a counterbalance to the rigors of gallery life in New York City. Her work remains celebratory and fresh, offering allusions both to the lineage of the vanguard artists she worked with and the natural surrounds of her seaside refuge—shells, birds, sun dappled fields, and colorful nautical markers. Parsons noted, “I really feel that light is everything. In fact I think that the mind is light. The whole world is light.” For Parsons, the expanded world denoted freedom to express herself on her own terms and to fully embrace the joy of creativity that led her to become one of American modernism’s most ardent champions in the first place.

Of special interest in *Betty Parsons: An Expanded World* is the installation of Parsons’s sculptures, which are situated against loosely painted blocks and bold stripes of color on

supporting walls and platforms. Here, Amy Sillman has taken from the compositional scheme and color palette of Parson's painting *Early Morning* (1967), on view nearby, to enliven the presentation. Detractors have noted that the Betty Parsons Gallery was among the first to champion white walls, but, in fact, during its earliest years it was her gallery artists who prepared her walls and installed her shows. We may therefore view Sillman as a latter-day Barnett Newman—the artist's artist—who playfully added her imprimatur to *An Expanded World*. Would Parsons have approved? In her own words, "I'd rather have encouragement from an artist than from anybody."

Charles Duncan is Executive Director of the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation.

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THE BROOKLYN RAIL