

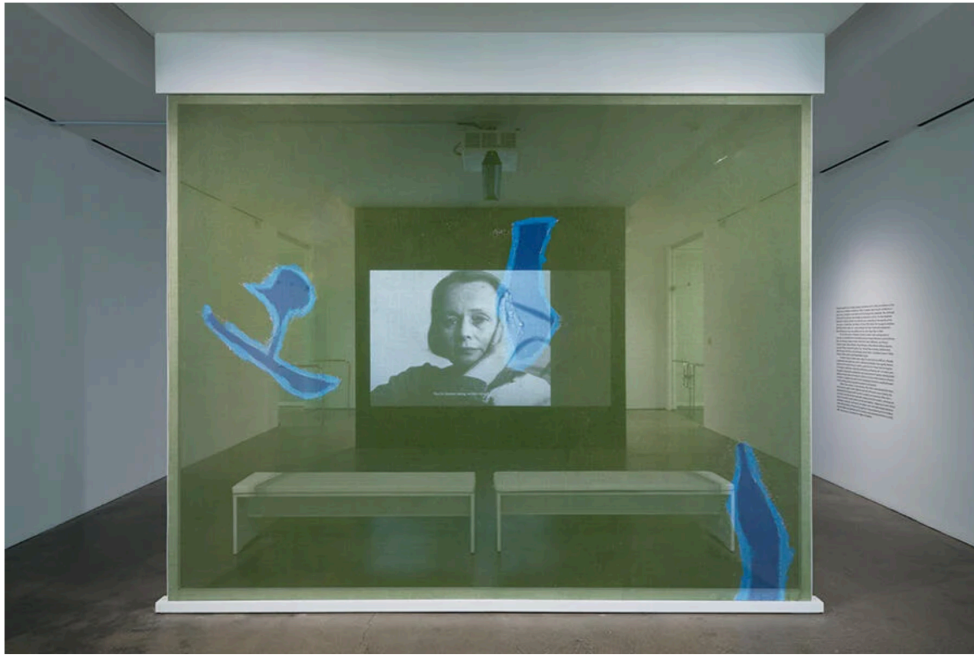
A Show Recognizes Legendary Art Dealer Betty Parsons – As An Artist

Made on her days off, Parsons's artworks at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-On-Hudson, are united by 'invisible presence'

BY LAUREN O'NEILL-BUTLER | 09 SEP 26

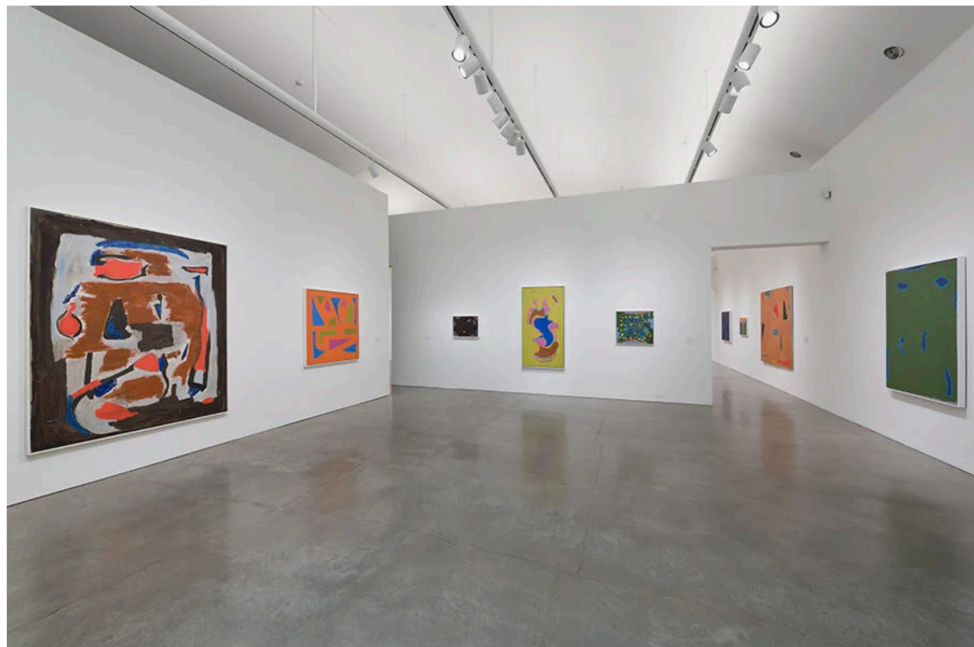


You could be forgiven for not knowing that Betty Parsons was an artist – arguably one of the finest of her generation. The storied dealer of abstract expressionists such as Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko (the ‘great big shots’, as she called them), Parsons never exhibited her own work in her eponymous New York City gallery – the legendary artist-run space *avant la lettre* on Manhattan’s 57th Street, which she steered from 1946 until her death in 1982, aged 82. She was too busy championing other artists (many of whom, like herself, were women and/or queer, including Forrest Bess, Judith Godwin and Agnes Martin), especially after many of her ‘big shots’ subsequently moved to Sidney Janis Gallery in the same building or Eleanor Ward’s Stable Gallery on nearby 58th Street.



'Betty Parsons: An Expanded World', 2026, exhibition view.
 Courtesy: Hessel Museum of Art; photograph: Carter Seddon

On her days off, Parsons painted lyrical abstractions: airy, bright and bold acrylics on canvas that veered towards the meditative, mystical and musical. This wasn't always the case, however, as seen in the artist's retrospective at the Hessel Museum of Art, deftly co-curated by Kelly Taxter and painter Amy Sillman. Titled 'An Expanded World', this exhibition of some 80 pieces reveals how Parsons's works on paper from the 1930s, including a watercolour portrait (*Emmanuel Bove*, 1930) and a landscape rendered in gouache and graphite (*Canary Islands*, 1932), later gave way to oils and acrylics on canvas by the late 1940s. Throughout the 1960s, Parsons prolifically painted one jaw-dropping acrylic abstraction after the next, while in the '70s, she fashioned whimsical painted sculptures out of construction debris and driftwood, working from her stunning home studio designed by the artist Tony Smith in Southold, Long Island.



'Betty Parsons: An Expanded World', 2026, exhibition view.
 Courtesy: Hessel Museum of Art; photograph: Carter Seddon

What unites Parsons's output? An 'invisible presence', as she told artist Helène Aylon (whose work she exhibited) in a 1977 interview. Today, her late paintings may be described as 'provisional': flat, spatial and punctuated with soft, off-kilter shapes that look like discarded paper scraps or islands floating on vivid monochrome grounds, chalky or matte in texture. Her canvases are alluringly enigmatic, with none of the heavy logic that underpins, say, a Pollock. Some pieces flaunt her skills as a colourist, such as *Bird in a Boat* (1971), where funky cobalt-blue forms outlined in cerulean vibrate against a saturated hunter-green background.

An enlarged detail from this mesmerizing work is printed on a wall-sized mesh screen at the start of the show. Behind it plays the first of a newly commissioned two-part documentary on Parsons. 'I always seemed to be in the right place at the right moment,' Parsons tells an interviewer. And indeed, she was – whether finding famous artists in New York, or later in Southold, where the resplendent light and her long walks on the beach took her back to an earlier calling. Parsons had initially planned to become a sculptor, studying alongside Alberto Giacometti in Paris and Alexander Archipenko in Los Angeles in the 1920s and '30s. In the last decade of her life, she picked the practice back up by gathering detritus from the ground. Her rough-hewn totemic wooden sculptures, cobbled together and accented with modestly painted lines, convey a special magic. Sometimes she rendered these objects on canvas, as in her anthropomorphic abstraction *Pope in the Boat* (1972), which resembles an eccentric child's toy.



'Betty Parsons: An Expanded World', 2026, exhibition view.
Courtesy: Hessel Museum of Art; photograph: Carter Seddon

The final room showcases some two dozen paintings and sculptures on a long wall and plinth, both painted by Sillman with towering vertical stripes in yellow, black, purple and red – a chromatic nod to Parsons's 1967 painting *Early Morning*. At first, this scene seemed a little too Instagram-ready for me, but on subsequent visits to the show, I grew to appreciate Sillman's channelling of Parsons. It felt like an apt signalling of Parsons's own thinking and process – a convincing attempt to beckon 'invisible presence'.

'Betty Parsons: An Expanded World' is on view at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-On-Hudson, until 18 October

Main image: 'Betty Parsons: An Expanded World', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: Hessel Museum of Art; photograph: Carter Seddon

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Lauren O'Neill-Butler is a writer, editor and educator. Her books include *The War of Art: A History of Artists' Protest in America* (Verso, 2025) and *Let's Have a Talk: Conversations with Women on Art and Culture* (Karma, 2021).
