

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH, WILL HEINRICH and MARTHA SCHWENDENER JUNE 22, 2017



"Challenge," a 1976 acrylic work by Betty Parsons. Betty Parsons Foundation and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

BETTY PARSONS

Through July 14. Alexander Gray Associates, 510 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-399-2636, alexandergray.com.

The art of Betty Parsons (1900-1982) has become progressively better known and more substantial since her death. It first seemed to consist primarily of sculptures cobbled together from driftwood, and deftly striped with bright nautical hues. They intimated a talented hobbyist, and seemed unlikely to eclipse the historical importance of Parsons's Manhattan art gallery, which staged often momentous

exhibitions of important New York artists, including Jackson Pollock, Agnes Martin and Richard Tuttle.

Eclipse now seems a lot more likely, thanks partly to "[Betty Parsons: Invisible Presence](#)," at Alexander Gray Associates. This small, 60-year survey puts Parsons's art on a much more equal footing with her achievement as a dealer and even with the work of the giants she represented. The show begins with a small bronze of a male nude that captures some of the great plasticity of Matisse's sculpture. It was made around 1922, when her brief marriage was dissolving, and she was studying in Paris with the French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle. (Parsons's future companions would mostly be women.)

A handful of early watercolors reflect Parsons's wide-ranging travels and exhibit an innately assured, relaxed use of materials and surface. But the standouts here are 14 radiant abstractions from her last 30 years that parlay these inclinations into a distinctive yet flexible style of saturated monochromes interrupted by small episodes of two or three astutely contrasted colors. It's a technique that flirts with geometry, calligraphy and cartography; plays with varying degrees of flatness; and finesses its way between the emotionality of Abstract Expressionism and the formal ecstasies of Color Field painting. The constant is Parsons's unwavering artistic integrity, which is one of the signs of greatness. —ROBERTA SMITH