

ARTnews

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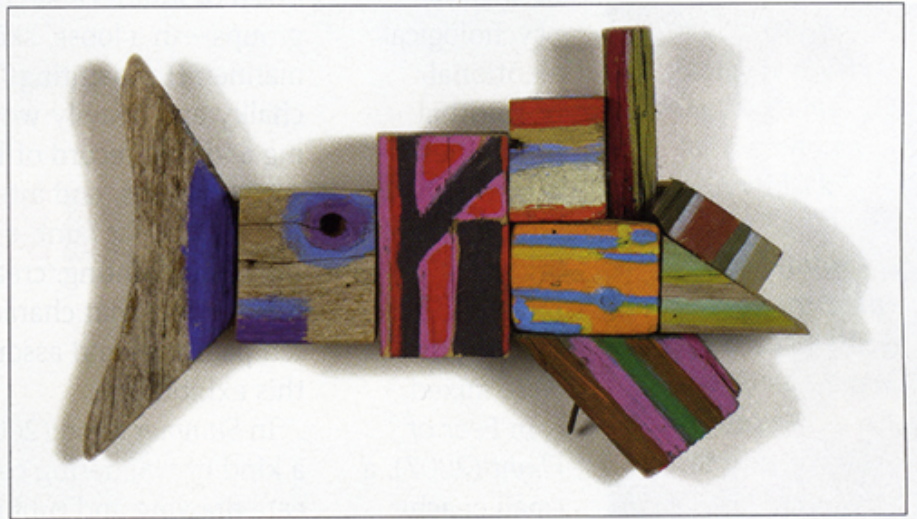
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Betty Parsons

Spanierman Modern

Betty Parsons the gallerist is justly celebrated: without her pioneering efforts, the history of Abstract Expressionism in particular would have been considerably different. But Parsons the artist is far less known, despite her lifelong artistic production. For those unaware of her artwork, this show provided a delightful surprise. Viewers were able to experience the artist's oil paintings, gouaches, and especially the later painted wooden constructions that make up the bulk of her oeuvre.

Parsons was clearly influenced in her paintings by the Abstract Expressionist artists whom she championed, most notably Hans Hofmann. But her constructions show her stepping away from that influence and finding a sculptural-cum-pictorial language that was as personal as it was congenial. Parsons's raw materials were fragments of weathered timber she found on the beach near her Long Island home; she was apparently drawn most to those pieces whose history in human hands was still discernible. Bits of furniture, planks, wheels, and even scraps of shop signs were carried back to her studio to be transformed into sculptures that fell somewhere between crude toys and constructed caricatures.



Betty Parsons, *Flight*, 1981, mixed media on wood, 10¼" x 17½" x 2¼".

Spanierman Modern.

The bright stripes and other motifs which adorned Parsons's wooden elements contributed something to the works' levity, but the improvised combinations that often suggested several things at the same time were equally important. One untitled piece from the 1970s might be either an island with a lighthouse or a small boat with a high smokestack, while an exuberant little thing called *Flight* (1981) is as much a fish as a bird. Parsons's forte was in serving up such delicious enigmas.

—Robert Ayers