

Art in America

September 2007

Ray Parker at Washburn

This exhibition of large abstract oils and smaller ink drawings by Ray Parker, ranging from 1968 through 1975, presented a lesser-known side of this artist's work. By the late 1950s, Parker had arrived at his signature imagery, which consisted of medium-size to large color fields shaped in uneven ellipses, circles or rounded squares with blurry edges applied to a white ground. The roots of those paintings lay in recent American abstraction, particularly Motherwell's "Spanish Elegies" and Gottlieb's "Bursts." By contrast, the

ancestry of the later paintings, with their more distinct, sinuous shapes, razor-sharp edges and flat or barely modulated bright colors, can be traced back to Matisse's cutouts. Similarly, the ink drawings of this later period hark back to the French master's sparest and purest draftsmanship, and consist of contour lines that suggest both shape and volume, with no modeling.

Each painting consists of a number of abstract curvilinear shapes—almost always of different colors—profiled against a colored ground. A vertical work from 1968 consists of four irregularly shaped, elongated forms surrounded by a flat field of lavender. The largest (black) shape reaches from the bottom left to the top right, bowing downward and toward the right so that there is almost twice as much space above it as beneath it. It presses down on a light orange curving shape anchored to the bottom center on one end and the right edge on the other, and that pushes in the opposite direction. One green and one light blue form float above the black diagonal;

the former, in roughly delineating a right angle, frames a large rectangle of the lavender ground.

A quality of floating was already present in Parker's first mature body of work. The later paintings, however, are more decorative, leading the way from Matisse to, say, Robert Kushner and other Pattern and Decoration artists. Parker's drawings suggest more clearly than the paintings that the abstract forms he arrived at might have had their sources in nature, and predominantly in foliage.

However, his palette, somewhat Pop in feeling, and the smooth brushwork and general flatness of his compositions, seem to skirt references to nature altogether. In a 1975 statement published in the exhibition brochure, Parker wrote, "For good in 1965, I got over the inborn American distaste for shape consciousness and the fear that drawing could be corny." These pictures, which are "simple and direct," in Parker's words, aimed to please at a time when such an aim—indeed, painting itself—was considered passé.

—Michaël Amy



Two of Ray Parker's untitled paintings, both 1968, oil on canvas; at Washburn.