

The Undervalued Paintings of Ray Parker

Mementos of a Lost Hamptons Bohemia

BY ELIZABETH FASOLINO

It was late morning in the elegant, skylit Washburn Gallery on 57th Street in Manhattan, where the late Ray Parker's family, Denise, his widow, and Kate and Caroline, his daughters, had gathered to talk about his life and work. On the walls was a new show of Mr. Parker's paintings, found by his daughters in his old Manhattan studio on Prince Street.

It is difficult to imagine these paintings being casually misplaced. They are large, more than five feet across, and brilliantly colorful. The occasion of their discovery, and the show, prompted his family to share some of their memories about their father, illuminating the life of a painter whose work has vividly withstood the passage of time, and is due more recognition than it has received in recent years.

A gray-haired man walked around the gallery, carefully looking at the paintings and politely approaching to ask Ms. Parker if she was the widow of the painter. "I talked to Ray," he said, "My name is Herbert Lust. One of my main beneficiaries is the Tel Aviv Museum. I've given them hundreds of things. They wanted that painting," he said, pointing at one of Mr. Parker's, hanging on the walls. "I gave them one. I think Ray Parker is the most undervalued artist in history. They're really splendid."

(Subsequent research confirmed that Mr. Lust is indeed a benefactor of the Tel Aviv Museum and the author of three art books, including "A Dozen Principles for Art Investment.") Ms. Parker and her daughters shook hands with the stranger and he moved off toward the elevator.

This small show shines, even without the context of an interview with the artist's family, or the compliments bestowed by the serendipitous appearance of Mr. Lust. There are four large paintings, and two small drawings. They are fresh and pristine, as if they had just come from the artist's studio. Abstract color shapes float across brilliant opaque ground. All the paintings are untitled, as was much of the artist's work, and three feature non-geometric shapes suspended against violet.

Ray Parker, who died in 1990 at the age of 67, painted on primed canvas tacked to the walls, but not on stretchers; his work was stored on rollers. Over the years his daughters have unearthed caches of these rolled paintings at the studio.

Ms. Parker, a striking woman with long silver hair, dramatic kohl-rimmed eyes, and the delicate build of a dancer, recently had a stroke, but it is impossible to tell. She is energetic and engaged, and eager to share memories of life with her husband and their famous circle of friends, much of which took place on the East End. With intermittent prompting from her spirited daughters, Ms. Parker gave an anecdotal history that gives social context to her husband's work.

Mr. Parker was a prolific artist in the second circle of American abstract painters. The first began with the advent of the New York Abstract Expressionists, most famously with a show by Willem de Kooning in 1948. The succeeding generation diverged and became further defined, spawning Color Field painting, lyrical abstraction, and Pop Art.

Mr. Parker was born far from New York City, the nexus of American abstract art, in Beresford, S.D., in 1922. As a teenager he loved music and played the trumpet in a quartet. After graduation from high school he joined the mer-



Untitled, 1968, by Ray Parker



Elaine Benson and Ray Parker in an undated photo courtesy of Denise Parker

chant marine as a radio officer. His ship was drafted for the D-Day invasion, and he was the "sparks," or radio operator. He returned to the United States and received an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. He began teaching in Minnesota shortly after graduation and in 1950 achieved recognition when his work was included in a show of three artists, "New Talent," at the Museum of Modern Art.

The next year Mr. Parker showed at the Walker Art Gallery in Minnesota, and his paintings inspired Stan Getz to do a recording of Jimmy Rainey's "Cherokee," titled "Parker 51."

The Parker pen people called and said, "We don't understand music but thanks for naming your album 'Parker 51.'" Ms. Parker added, "And they sent a case of pens!"

Mr. Parker met his future wife, Denise Griffin, at a party in Greenwich Village in 1953. She was an actor. "We were playing a game: If you were stranded on a desert island by yourself, who would you want to be with? We had

been dancing, and I had on a peasant blouse, and a red dirndl skirt. One woman, when she saw how Ray was paying attention to me, said, 'She would vamp a man!' Ray was so handsome."

Not long afterward the newly wed Mr. and Ms. Parker took their first trip together to East Hampton. The Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell "had gone to Aspen to be a guest artist and had a car on 95th Street that he let Ray use," Ms. Parker said. "One Saturday he said, 'Let's go to East Hampton.' It took us four or five hours. We were going through Bridgehampton and we passed this big old red house with Japanese lanterns. 'Somebody's having a good party!' Ray said."

"We went on to Springs. 'The only place I know is Fireplace Road, Lee and Jackson's,'" Ms. Parker remembered her husband saying (the Lee and Jackson in question being Krasner and Pollock, of course), and so they made their way to their friends' place. "We were sitting in the lawn chairs and told them about the Bridgehampton house with the Japanese lanterns. They said, 'We just left! We went back, and it was absolutely fabulous. Ludwig Sander, de Kooning, and Franz Kline had the house. Bill [de Kooning] had painted the toilets for the party, and it was beautiful. It was the most fabulous party," Ms. Parker said.

"There was a bar on Springs-Fireplace Road, where the senior center is today," Ms. Parker continued. "It was a honky-tonk. Ellie Poindexter — an eminent art dealer 'Jimmy' — James, a painter — and Charlotte Brooks, they were all there. Jimmy and Charlotte were wonderful. They said, 'Come and stay with us!' They lived in Montauk. We stayed in his studio, perched on the cliff. The next day they drove us all around, and they said, '[Alfonso] Ossorio's having a big party.' Ossorio had [Jean] Dubuffet in the bathroom! I met everyone. We ended up living in the guest house at the Creeks."

"I thought East Hampton was the most glamorous place in the world. We were very poor. I stopped acting," she said, laughing. "Bob Motherwell was sent by the U.S. State Department to Germany. He had a seminar at Hunter, and asked Ray to take his seminar." Mr. Parker thus took over Motherwell's studio-art seminar and began his 35-year tenure at Hunter College.

It is from about this time that the evolution of Mr. Parker's work began to take on distinctly identifiable chronological periods. Beginning with his "Strokes" paintings in the early 1950s, the artist documented his love affair with color.

"Daddy got a loft on LaGuardia, north of Broadway," Caroline Parker said. "Bobby De Niro was always running around. Robert De Niro Sr. lived at West Third and Bleecker, and was a painter. There was a courtyard in the back, and the De Niros lived in the back. That's where he started doing the 'Simple' paintings with a rag, moving color to the edges."

At this time his career was also on a steep ascent. William Agee, the art historian, has written: "From 1958 to 1965 Ray Parker made some of the best painting done by any artist after 1950. He called the paintings the 'Simple' paintings. Seen now they reaffirm Mr. Parker as one of the most important artists of this period."

"There was a time when he was very influenced by

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jazz," Caroline Parker said. "Especially improvisational jazz. He said he moved out of the 'Simple' paintings because he had the freedom of the hand. He was in the moment. Everything was line and color."

The "Simple" paintings made the leap from the Abstract Expressionists' textural surfaces and rough edges toward a more minimalist style, which paralleled the emergence of Color Field painting and lyrical abstraction.

Mr. Parker's work after 1965 began to be defined as his "curvilinear" period, in which he played with lines and color, and drawing. The paintings on view at the Washburn date from this period. They are full of brilliant hues and shapes that dance across the canvases, more like flattened abstractions of Impressionist paintings than the work of the Abstract Expressionists.

"He often worked on paper," said Caroline Parker of this period. "It was a

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Cal and Kimberly, Brad and Serena."

Back to our moist planet, Mars. If asked (unlikely), would I go? Unlikely, but, golly, to landscape an entire planet! Or just a few hundred miles of it. I can see myself sitting somewhere where I've staked out my fiefdom, the forest going there, the river and waterfalls and pools there. Orchards and vineyards. Stables. Herds of this and that and definitely free-range chickens. Silo-sized compost piles and a park around my manse. Way, way out there a little village for the workers, each with their own acres. Schools, bookstores, and cozy bars.

Sitting there, conjuring this gracious kingdom of peace and plenty. The bountiful wool from my merinos. The great cheeses I'll make from my Nubian goats. Belted Galloways. All cloned, of course. What with the raging costs of transportation, my stock will come in vacuum-packed frozen containers. My dogs, too.

more calligraphic transitional period, with open brushwork and thin washes of paint. He was trying to figure out how best to make a straight line. He had all these ketchup bottles and twigs, trying to get a line of paint without a brush. He ended up making it with paint out of the tube."

In May 1967 the Parker family bought their house on Oyster Shores Road in Hampton Waters with a \$10,000 artist's fellowship, Ms. Parker said. "[Wilfrid] Zogbaum's wife showed us the house. We lived in a tenement in New York City, where you had to pull the chain for the toilet. The girls grew up there. They were so excited when we got the house."

Not long after the closing she raced to yard sales and thrift shops to find furniture so they could rent it to pay the mortgage. "Our accountant said, 'You can't afford that house!'" she recalled.

The house became the center of their lives each summer. "There was a huge

community of kids," said Ms. Parker. "We got Ray a rowboat and called it Untitled, because all his paintings were untitled. Jim Bennett, a neighbor, said, 'Yeah, Ray can paint. He doesn't know much about boats, though!' We also had a 'magic' peach tree that just suddenly appeared."

"He made us eat our fruit outside," Kate Parker explained. "One of our peach pits took root. We had juniper bushes all around, and there, all of a sudden, was a giant peach tree." When Mr. Parker died the peach tree also died, said Ms. Parker.

"We used to go for breakfast at Louse Point," Ms. Parker continued. "I'd bring a big thermos of coffee."

Later that year Mr. Parker began renting a barn on Pantigo Road, where Citarella is today, behind the old Bohack's grocery store, to use as his studio in East Hampton. "Elbert Edwards owned the barn," said Ms. Parker. "It was full of antique sleds. There were haystacks. It was like something out of a Russian novel. The first floor was covered in hay. When you looked up you could see the bottom of the sleds."

"The artists all traded their work. We have an Ossorio, a de Kooning, a Bill King," Caroline Parker said. "There was a lot of sociability. At one time Dad shared his space with Syd Solomon."

In 1982 a fire ripped through the barn, destroying the collection of sleds and 45 paintings, estimated at the time to be worth \$81,000. Mr. Parker was deeply saddened by the fire and for a long time would scavenge the cinders and take home items that had not melted in the flames. "It was a tragedy," Ms. Parker said. "He would bring his tools home and soak them in the bathtub. His tin snips. He wanted to keep his tools."

"He stopped painting in 1987," Caroline Parker said. "'Well, kid, I've done it,' he said. He had come full circle."

The show is on view through March 3 at the Washburn Gallery, 20 West 57th Street, New York. The gallery is open from Tuesday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

realtor I know.

"Robert, Robert, I've been looking for you everywhere. I've got the crater of your dreams for you. It's a bit of a throw-down, but it's higher than anything else and you can overlook the other pods. What a view! We'll have to roll it all before the Intergalactic Planning Commission, but I don't think it'll be much of a sweat. No goats, I'm sorry to say. Too smelly. So your pecorino is out. But yaks are the coming thing in this climate, and you, you're so smart you'd be able to refine chumash into the best yogurt ever. Uncle Bob's Organic Farm. Park your spacecraft at the gates. Get decontaminated and hoof it to the homemade water exhibit. Bob's your ticket to get rid of whatever ails you. Lordy, these Martian flus don't give up. Red this. Red that. Lucinda's been in bed two years at least! Where are you going?"



Ray Parker with his daughters, Caroline, left, and Kate, right, in front of his boat, the Untitled, at Three Mile Harbor around 1972. *Photo Courtesy of Denise Parker*



Ray Parker in his studio in East Hampton sometime before it was destroyed by fire in 1982.

Dan Budnik Photo, Courtesy of Denise Parker