

# The Quiet



# Abstractionist

**Charlotte Park**, a master of line and color, is at last being given her rightful place in the galaxy of Abstract Expressionists.

**By the time she finally began to get the recognition** she deserved, the painter Charlotte Park was already past 90 and suffering from Alzheimer's disease. As a result, it's likely that the glowing review *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith gave her 2010 exhibition at Spanierman Modern did not impinge much on her awareness. On the other hand, it's also likely that even if it had, or if the recognition had come earlier, Park would not have been overly impressed.

We live in an era of rediscoveries in the arts. One aspect of that is the growing awareness that the work of women artists in the 20th century was marginal-

ized or outright ignored due to sexism both individual and institutional. In the case of the abstract artists of the post-World War II period, the neglect is particularly glaring, not only because so many important contributors were women but because of the cult of machismo among so many of the male artists, and the press' endorsement of that mindset. Park's relative obscurity is certainly connected to these trends, but it also appears that she wasn't interested in self-promotion. Of course, reluctance to push oneself forward can itself be a consequence of larger social forces,

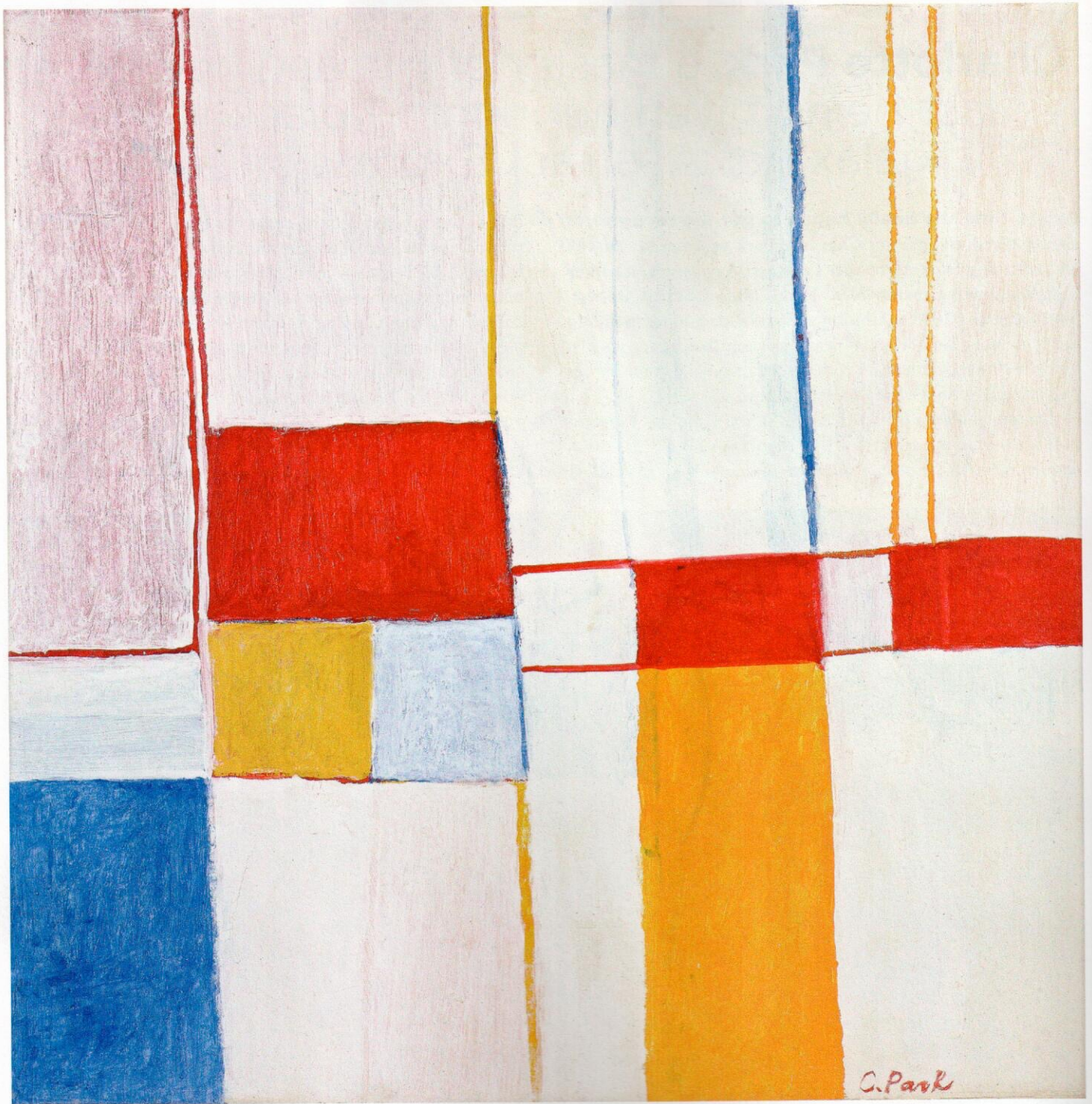
**By John Dorfman**

but it seems that Park was content to pursue her painting for its own sake and truly did not desire



This page: Charlotte Park, *Untitled (Black and Gray IV)*, circa 1950, gouache on paper, 45.4 x 58.3 cm. Opposite: *Untitled*, circa 1963, oil on canvas, 127 x 127 cm.

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*Pereshia*, 1976–78, acrylic on canvas, 45.7 x 45.7 cm.

fame. And while she was married to an artist, James Brooks, who was far better known than she was, it is by no means clear that she sacrificed her career for his, as was sometimes the case with artistic couples in the 1950s. In fact, in 1949 Park and Brooks rented “his and hers” studios next to each other in Montauk, on the far East End of Long Island, and worked there quite happily for a long time, in different styles and apparently without rivalry.

Whatever the case may be—and without a detailed biogra-

phy we can't know her motives for sure—Charlotte Park is now increasingly accepted as one of the important Abstract Expressionists. In her *Times* review, Smith called her “a natural painter and gifted colorist,” singling out one work from the exhibition as deserving “prominent placement in a museum.” (Park’s work is now in the collections of the National Gallery, the Whitney, and the Parrish Art Museum.) Writing in *Artforum* about the same show, Robert Pincus-Witten called Park a “painter of enormous

merit” with a “major gift.” Her earliest work is largely in black and white, with an emphasis on line and form, and when she moved into color it was with an exuberance inspired by nature. Later in life she adopted geometric abstraction as a working method, and also made collages. All of these works, in a creative career spanning more than half a century, show a strength and self-assurance that conflict quite noticeably with the artist’s low-profile approach to publicity, and certainly give the lie to any stereotyping about feminine versus masculine styles in painting.

Park was a New Englander, born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1918. In 1939 she graduated from the Yale School of Art. During World War II she was in Washington, D.C., working for the United States Housing Authority and then the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor of the CIA. It was in Washington that she met Brooks, 12 years her senior and already an accomplished painter. In 1945 they moved together to New York, where Park studied privately with Wallace Harrison, an Australian artist. In 1947, she and Brooks were married. They had already become part of the downtown avant-garde art scene that revolved around the Cedar Tavern and the Eighth Street Artists Club. Park and Brooks were good friends with Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, but among the hard-partying artists in those circles they stood out as a quiet and relatively abstemious couple.

Park and Brooks followed Krasner and Pollock’s lead in moving out to the Hamptons (or the East End, as it was known back



then), settling in Montauk, while their friends established themselves in the town of Springs. Willem and Elaine de Kooning also spent time in the area, as did Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell, Perle Fine and Maurice Berezov, Jane Freilicher, Mary Abbott, Joan Mitchell, and many others. All were seeking respite from the exhaustingly hectic life of the city, which could often be a distraction from creative endeavor. Park and Brooks lived and painted in Montauk until 1954, when Hurricane Carol blew their studios off the cliff and down into the bay, at which point they moved to Springs, as well.

Park’s black and white paintings from the early ’50s are bold in their delineation of positive and negative space, somewhat akin to the monochrome experiments being pursued at the time by artists including de Kooning and Franz Kline. The thick black lines serve as a kind of underlying structure for the composition, while the white is a presence rather than an absence. The interplay of the

From left: Charlotte Park in the doorway of her Montauk studio, circa 1954; *Aztec*, circa 1951, oil on canvas, 60 x 33 cm.

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From top: *Untitled (Color Collage II)*, circa 1957, collage and gouache on paper, 57.1 x 72.4 cm.; *Untitled*, circa 1985, acrylic on paper, 28.6 x 28.6 cm.

white and black areas of these works has a dynamic quality that suggests the yin and yang of Chinese philosophy and artistic symbolism. Indeed sometimes, as in the work of Kline, the black strokes seem to echo East Asian calligraphy. By the mid-'50s Park was working in color, not tentatively working it into her monochromes but decisively letting bursts of light into her canvases.

Unlike her husband, Park was not inclined to dilute her paint and let it soak into the canvas, nor did she engage in dripping. She adhered to a fairly high impasto, and her 1950s paintings have a solidity to them that pairs well with the gestural approach



she used. These are heavy, complex works that often deal in contrasting and potentially incongruous colors that the artist manages to hold together and prevent from flying apart. Oranges, blues, and blacks that could easily be at war with each other are tamed and made to keep the peace, while in other paintings the various colors are closely related, all warm or all cool, in unconflicted harmony. Some of the paintings have scraped surfaces that make them seem almost like palimpsests.

In the '60s, Park moved into a gentler, more contemplative phase, in which the world of nature was a major source of inspiration. As a life-



*Jubilee*, circa 1955, oil on canvas, 172.7 x 147.3 cm.

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From top: *Departure*, circa 1955, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 114.3 cm.;  
*Tuolomne*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 35.6 x 35.6 cm.



long devotee of birdwatching and gardening, it was feathers and petals that she abstracted from rather than a conventional landscape. Works from this period show smaller patches of color interacting, with an airier quality communicated by a layer of white underpainting. In fact, over time this light and airy quality is magnified, to the point where in Park's paintings from the '70s and early '80s, white dominates the composition, serving as a background for thin lines of color. In the '80s and '90s, under the influence of Mondrian's Neoplasticism, she was making works that qualify as geometric abstraction, although there's always some degree of calligraphic curve to her line that resists the mathematical precision of geometric art.

Park began exhibiting her work in 1952 in group shows at the Peridot Gallery in New York, and was included in the Whitney Annual of 1953. She followed that with annual groups shows in the city, at Tanager Gallery and Stable Gallery in 1954–58. The Stable Gallery annuals, which were considered an extension of the famous Ninth Street Show, were important events



From top: *Masque*, circa 1950, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 61 cm.; *Zachary*, 1955, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 119.4 cm.

in defining the New York School; some 250 artists participated between 1953 and 1957. Park had a solo show at Tanager in '57; after that, she didn't have another solo until 1973. She did, however, continue to exhibit regularly in group shows. In the late '70s and early '80s she had a few solo shows on the East End and in the city, and again in 2002–03 and 2010. In 2016, Berry Campbell, which now represents her estate, gave her a full retrospective.

In 2010 Park died in East Hampton, N.Y., at the age of 92, not long after her triumphal show at Spanierman. In her review of that show, Roberta Smith had written, "It is probably too late for Charlotte Park ... to witness her ascension into the ranks of widely known Abstract Expressionists." Whether or not that was true, it is certainly never too late for us as viewers to experience her unique vision and technique, nor too late for critics and art historians to fill in the gap to the historical record where this powerful yet self-effacing artist belongs. 