

Charlotte Park

SPANIERMAN MODERN

It is no secret that the Abstract Expressionists objectified and marginalized women. But as those decades recede ever further back (and the mighty male figures only grow more firmly ensconced in the canon), the AbEx pantheon has expanded to include major female painters such as Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner. And, at this shifting frontier, newer figures (not new, of course, to the history of Abstract Expressionism but to canonic admiration) now command attention—painters of enormous merit who, perforce, were ground down by the era's insistent denigration of women or whose admirable achievements were compromised by the demands of their husbands' careers (even as those careers may still be up for grabs in the larger play of historical recontextualization). The case of Charlotte Park is exemplary; hers was a major gift all but stifled by a happily embraced domesticity and by the critical bullying of a brutally doctrinaire art world.

New England-born in 1918, Charlotte Park graduated from the Yale School of Art and Architecture in 1939 (now the Yale School of Fine Arts). Eventually moving to New York City, she married the notable painter James Brooks in 1947. Being especially close to Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner during the 1950s, Park and Brooks were ornaments of AbEx society, both in the city and out in East Hampton, to which the notables absconded during the summer months.

Around 1950, Park found her stride in a body of black-and-white paintings and drawings. Executed within a kind of pictogrammatic, loosely Cubist grid, these works—a memorable example being #25, 1951—suggested vaguely animistic configurations (for all their commitment to abstraction), and for Park served, as black-and-white paintings did for Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline, as the platform from which her own work would spring even higher. Working through occasionally Mannerist color—lavender or papaya—and by instants a Hoffman-like articulation of color and space, Park arrived at her white, black, blue, or red *Untitleds*, ca. 1957, executed with a Gustonish authority. To be sure, the work of at least two men had its effect: the loping gestures of Brooks's virtuosic action painting and the clouding white veils of Giorgio Cavallon.

How could it be otherwise? Back then, no one was thought to be *that* original, except perhaps Pollock. Downtown New York in the 1950s, like Florence in 1425, was jammed with major artists of both genders—to be found, as it were, at every street corner, where shoulders rubbed and bodies might be pushed to the curb. During the summer months, on-the-beach backbiting typified the humor, fun, longing, envy, and critical high jinks of the East Hampton art scene. Some terrific painters had little stomach for it. Charlotte Park was one of them.

Thus, her early exhibition history—mostly a suite of group shows out on the island or inclusions in shows at modest artist cooperatives here in the city—evinces insularity and timidity: seen little; spoken of less. Which makes this show all the more poignant. Now in her nineties, Park is having the last laugh—a laugh that rings clearer with each passing year.

Charlotte Park,
#25, 1951, oil on
canvas, 37 x 46".



—Robert Pincus-Witten