

Parker and Wilson: Unintended Serendipity

By Jennifer Landes

(12/03/2009) There is often an unintended serendipity in the showing of South Fork artists in New York City. One gallery's artist can set up parallels and contrasts with another one in a wonderfully random happenstance that may lead to a new understanding or appreciation of both.

Such a felicitous pairing is happening in New York right now with the showing of Jane Wilson at DC Moore and Ray Parker at Joan Washburn. That both artists studied painting in Iowa, which was also the home state of Ms. Wilson, and came to New York at roughly the same time puts them in a very fruitful relationship of contrasts.

Add to the mix their productive creative association with the South Fork and there is not too much these artists don't have in common, at least in formative influences. How each chose to take their education and experience to bear in their singular painting styles tells another story.

Each spent a significant amount of time teaching. Mr. Parker taught at Hunter College for more than 30 years. Ms. Wilson had positions at Columbia University, Parsons, Cooper Union, and Pratt.

In writings about their art, at least one observer has credited Henri Matisse's New York retrospective in 1949 with having an impact, whether directly or indirectly, on their work. The work of Mark Rothko is intrinsic to one, and vaguely alluded to in the other's paintings in the way the canvas is marked and structured. Each borrowing still prompts original ways of seeing in both artists' work.



Ray Parker's "Love Denise, Glad You Like It," an oil-on-canvas work from 1960, is typical of the style of his "Simple Paintings" of that period.



"Surf at Midnight," which Jane Wilson painted last year, is only 12 by 16 inches, but still has the same dramatic impact of her larger canvases.

Both appear to have tried their hands at Abstract Expressionism, but came to reject some of it and conform the remaining bits to their own ends. Ms. Wilson opted for an expressionistic depiction of landscapes, whereas Mr. Parker went for a more minimalist, color-field approach, derived perhaps from Robert Motherwell and Adolph Gottlieb, but still his own.

Mr. Parker, who was born in 1922, died in 1990. The works on view at the Washburn Gallery are perhaps his best known. Called "The Simple Paintings," they were painted in the late 1950s to early 1960s and show the incipient understanding of the limits of Abstract Expressionism and the dawn of the new minimal aesthetic.

Predominantly stacked ovoid shapes in dark purples

or muted earth tones, the paintings appear to be evidence of an artist who was not in favor of making anything too pretty or superficial even while extolling the surface of his canvases.

The freely formed orbs can seem somewhat musical, like big full notes struck on a bass. Their color strikes a similar chord. Dense and slightly brooding, they seem earthy and almost bluesy, and not necessarily the odes to his love Denise that he might have intended. Despite equipoise, there is little beauty in the work even as it can imply joy and buoyancy. They are paintings of contradictions. This complicates their simplicity and indeed makes them memorable.

The paintings of Ms. Wilson show an artist well astride her maturity, fully in command of her talent with an eye still fresh and capable of awe. One would think that, with a standardized format of small and medium-large, mostly squarish canvases and watercolor compositions, and a layered big-sky landscape subject matter, an artist would run out of things to say.

Yet with a masterful brushstroke and a breathtaking confidence in color that could come from only the young and brash or the eyes of one who has seen everything and already knows how it looks inside-out or in its negative, she finds new ways of expressing the moods and physical properties of the landscape. Through her eyes they begin to lose their associations and become almost pure meditations.

Although many of the paintings in the exhibit at DC Moore feel familiar and grounded in the striations from earth, atmosphere, and sky, others feel like pure distilled atmosphere in colors either ethereally pink, gray, and blue or deep steel, mauve, and even a bilious green. One green sun setting in a sweltering heat is mystifying and brilliantly captivating at the same time as it forces the viewer to recall whether something so uncanny could ever have been witnessed, because it feels so true.

Ms. Wilson has had a retrospective monograph published this year, one of the first to put her 60-year career into perspective. While she has exhibited regularly since she helped found the Hansa Gallery in 1953, there have been few opportunities to consider her career in full. With a rich body of work that is only deepening in both meaning and sublimity, it is well worth giving the artist her due. And as well as her images reproduce, there is no substitute for seeing them firsthand.

Luc Sante once referred to her as “the sky’s biographer.” What more needs to be said?

The exhibit at Washburn closes on Jan. 9. Ms. Wilson’s show at DC Moore closes on Dec. 23.