

On cover: *Untitled* [535], 1981, acrylic on canvas, 90" x 129"

499parkavenue / The Lobby Gallery

499 Park Avenue (at 59th Street), New York, NY 10022

Gallery hours: Monday - Friday, 8am - 6pm

Acknowledgements

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RAY PARKER Color into Line

Curator Dorothy Solomon, DSA Fine Arts

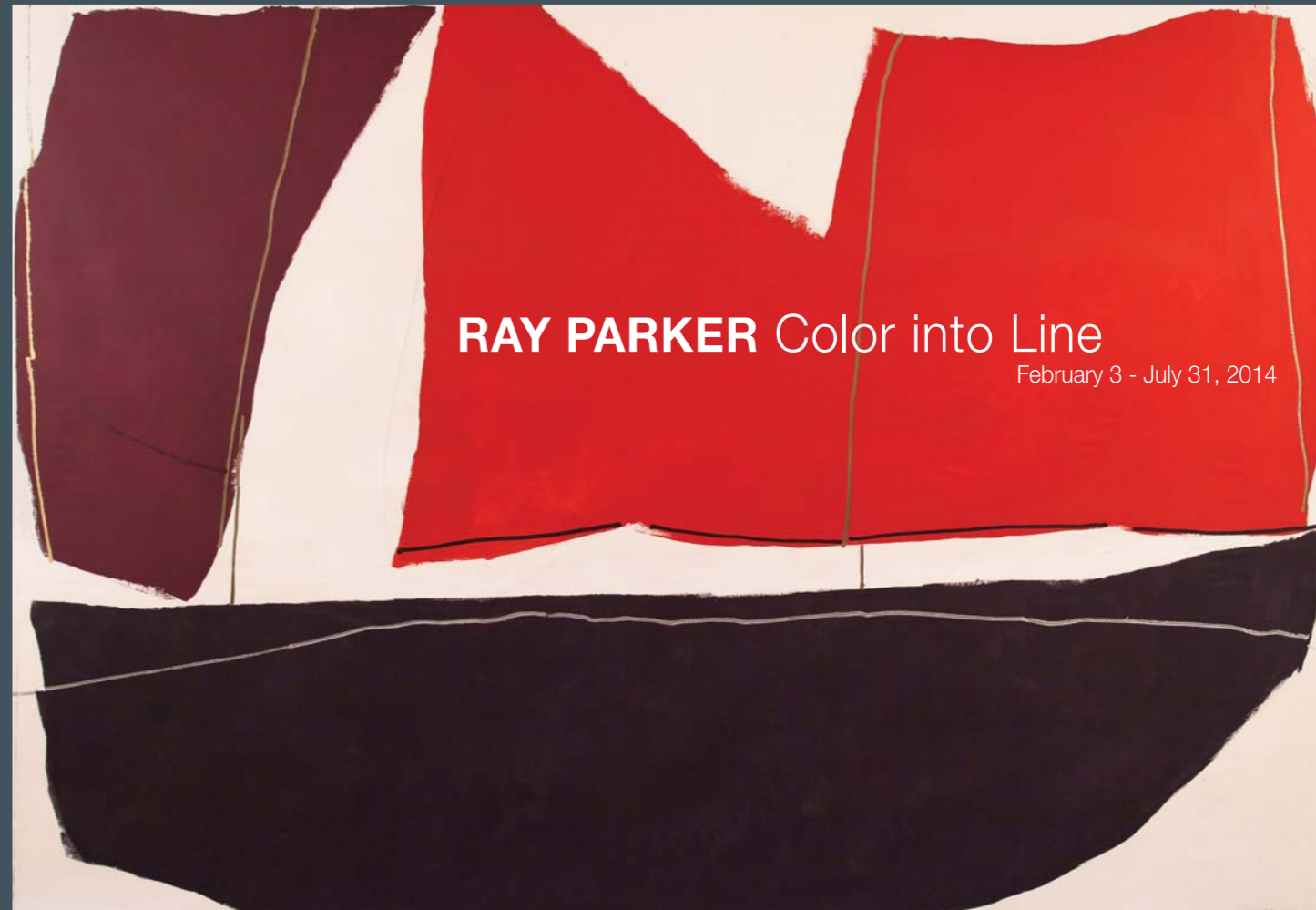
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RAY PARKER Color into Line

February 3 - July 31, 2014

RAY PARKER Color into Line

In Ray Parker's paintings, here as always, color creates shape and space. But in each of the seven paintings included in this exhibition, Parker tried something almost entirely new in his oeuvre: he allowed line to take on a central role. Parker certainly knew how to draw: he had studied at the University of Iowa, where drawing was a core part of the curriculum; he taught drawing at Hunter College for years; and his earliest works—loose cubist grids, the stroke paintings—were largely informed by strong lines. But *these* lines—unselfconscious and assertive as they are—are not drawing per se. In fact, looking at them closely, at how they function within these paintings, reveals Parker's achievement of new harmonies between form, line, and color in both process and outcome.

In the early 1980s, Parker had begun working with a new vocabulary of forms. Their particular shapes are a result of planning combined with in-process adjustments. Parker, at this time, had started outlining the rectangular space of the canvas as well as the shapes before he began painting. This was a change from the more purely improvisational methods of his earlier series of *Simple Paintings* (1958-1965), where he allowed the color to define both space and shape as he worked, applying pigment on a bare, primed canvas with a rag, and waiting until he was finished painting before stretching the canvas. It was also a change from his paintings of the 1970s, which were much more neatly defined: the forms were crisp and elegant—like Matisse's cutouts—and they floated on richly colored backgrounds. Here, a degree of improvisational appearance has returned. Yet despite any forethought that went into them, these 80s paintings were never wholly dictated by planning. Look, for example, at the peak of the red form in *Untitled* [537]. To the left of the apex, under the white paint, a penciled outline of a different peak is just visible. When it came time to apply paint to canvas, Parker allowed color to have the final say. Drawing guided process, but painting won the day.

Parker belonged to a tradition of color painting in America that has its roots in Cezanne and Matisse, the two European masters of color. The decades during which Parker taught at Hunter College saw the development of a Hunter Color School, where a group of painters working in color abstraction stimulated and learned from one another. Parker also admired Mark Rothko, exemplar of color painting in the Abstract Expressionist milieu, and he knew Robert Motherwell from their time teaching at Hunter together. Parker's forms and the way in which he utilized color can be best understood, at least in part, as coming out of these examples.

But the introduction of line in these paintings tells us something more. Parker's lines are simultaneously precise and structural like



Untitled [808], 1981, acrylic on canvas, 89" x 133"



Untitled [537], 1981, acrylic on canvas, 90" x 136"



Untitled [585], 1984, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 77"

drawing, and atmospheric and improvisational—much like how color functioned in his paintings. They are the relatives to the horizontal and vertical cross-hatches of a formal grid in the way they hold the compositions together, but their distinct colors and unique trajectories interact, as colors and shapes do, with the other elements to call attention to different structural and chromatic relations. See, for example, how the orange line in *Untitled* [582] plays differently against the orange background than it does against the blue quadrilateral, or how the same gold appears different against white than it does against red in *Untitled* [808]. See, also, in *Untitled* [808] how the black line guides the horizontal black form into the white form, creating the space for the black while also defining the white. Significantly, the particular width and density of these lines are a result of a unique method that Parker struck upon after experimenting with various application techniques, ranging from various brushes to sticks, before finally arriving at the idea of drawing lines with paint straight out of the tube. The very process itself was now a fusion of painting and drawing.

Abolishing the hierarchy between painterly effect and draftsman's precision—between *colorito* and *disegno*—had been one of the fundamental drives of modernism. This dichotomy had defined art history since the Renaissance, and artists ranging from Cezanne to Matisse, Stuart Davis to Jackson Pollock, had all in one way or another bound color and line together. Fusing drawing and painting combined the grounding impact of line and the emotive impact of color; careful preparation and processional discovery; Dürer and Rembrandt; but in abstract painting, color and line were unleashed from representational content, allowing them to interact of their own accord.

In these paintings, Parker had found his own way to fuse color and line, in both process and outcome. In his so-called *Simple Paintings*, Parker had, in his own words, “let color tell the whole story.” But he also said that by 1965 he was over “the fear that drawing could be corny....Quitting the myth that a painter must be innocent of the artifice of art freed me of the limits and rules I had made for myself for color and field.” These paintings are a result of that newfound freedom. They also represent a more personal fusion: Parker painted these in the last decade of his life, and in them we can see Parker coming full circle. The three larger paintings in this show hark back to the *Simple Paintings*, with their bare primed canvas as base, while the comparatively smaller paintings retain the solid unmodulated color ground of Parker's paintings of the 1970s. In all of them, he reintroduced elements of drawing, harking back to his very earliest work and his student years at Iowa. Parker, here, gives us a beautiful and confident synthesis of various elements tested in other formats and combinations over the years, presented with clarity and confidence, just as they always had been but now anew.



Untitled [582] 1984, acrylic on canvas, 82" x 77"