

New York's Top October Art Exhibitions Have A Southern Flavor

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Arts

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I cover the intersection of art and travel.



Dusti Bongé, Sunflowers, 1944. Oil on canvas 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm).

Courtesy of the Dusti Bongé Art Foundation © Dusti Bongé Art Foundation

The pleasures of fall in New York City go beyond sweater weather, cute boots and pumpkin spice everything. Autumn in The City sees galleries and museums putting their best foot forward. This year is no exception.

The name Betty Parsons (1900–1982) will be familiar to NYC art hounds. Her eponymous gallery opened in Manhattan in 1946 and would represent the likes of Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner, Hedda Sterne and Clyfford Still. And **Dusti Bongé** (1903–1993).

That name will not be familiar to New Yorkers.

Bongé lived in New York for about 10 years in the late 20s and early 30s. She acted on stage and in silent films. She returned to her native Biloxi, MS to raise her son. She also started her painting career there. A career that would see her become Mississippi's first artist to work exclusively in a Modernist style with representation by Parsons all the way from the Gulf Coast.

Bongé and Parsons' relationship extended well beyond artist and gallerist. The two were close friends, traveling extensively together, remaining in regular contact for decades until Parson's death.

Hollis Taggart gallery (521 W. 26th Street) highlights their bond during "Kinship: Dusti Bongé and Betty Parsons." On view from October 13 to November 12, 2022, the exhibition is the first to examine Bongé's close personal and professional ties with Parsons and the ways in which their relationship shaped Bongé's career.

"They were both creative, modern women, born at the turn of the century who also came from similar backgrounds. Dusti's as well as Betty's maternal grandmothers were both from Louisiana plantation families," Dusti Bongé Art Foundation Executive Director Ligia Römer told Forbes.com, explaining the pair's instant connection.

Bongé and Parsons were that special duo who found something akin to a soul mate in midlife.

"Both in their early forties then, they had each spent over a decade on their own, Dusti having been widowed and Betty having been divorced," Römer said. "They had been living independent lives, pursuing their creativity on their own terms without succumbing to the conventional expectations imposed on women of their generation and privileged background. They both chose never to marry again, preferring to forge their own paths. And finally, as artists, both Dusti and Betty were not interested in expounding or theorizing about art, but rather on creating it."



Dusti Bongé and Betty Parsons with Gabriel Jureidini in Mexico, 1954. Jack Robinson Archive. Photo ...

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The two met in 1945 when Bongé had her art in a group show at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery where Betty Parsons was gallery assistant at the time.

“Kinship” includes 35 works by Bongé, reintroducing audiences to the full arc of her career, with examples of her Modernist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist paintings and works on paper. If ever there was an example for how a patriarchal, New York-centric art world unjustly dismissed artists not fitting that strict categorization, it is Bongé. Viewing the work

leaves visitors somewhere between disbelief and outrage at how Bongé's gender and remove from The City has left her excluded from all, but the most granular explorations of Modern art.

In another revelation, "Kinship" features 15 works by Parsons, most of which were gifted to Bongé throughout their friendship and have never been seen before. Furthermore, archival material, such as vacation photographs from the duo's travels to Mexico and the Gulf Coast, reinforce the intimate ties of friendship the two enjoyed.

"I am sure that for Dusti finding such a kindred spirit both in terms of creativity as well as self-determination was crucial, given that her home environment (Biloxi), no matter how beautiful, inspiring and supportive, nonetheless was one where her fierce independence and artistic pursuits were probably not well understood, even if they were accepted," Römer said. "They both loved to travel and experience other cultures. In addition, the modern artworld was so dominated by male stars that for Dusti finding another woman who could inherently appreciate and share her artistic pursuits must have been a true gift."

Bongé had her first Betty Parsons Gallery solo exhibition in 1956, solidifying Bongé's position among the ranks of other iconic artists represented there. Bongé was featured in group exhibitions at Parsons' gallery in 1955, 1957, 1958, and 1960, and in five solo shows in 1956, 1958, 1960, 1962, and 1975. The exhibition captures the significance of network and relationship building among women within the art ecosystem at midcentury, with Parsons leveraging her own success as a gallerist to bring forward Bongé's innovative vision and work.

At Parsons urging, Bongé tried to make one more go of it in New York in the 50's, but only lasted a few months.

"Ultimately, Dusti knew herself well and realized that her ability to pursue her work on her own terms meant not having to succumb to the demands of the art world," Römer said. "And she was a very proud Southerner. She did always stay connected to the creative circles in New York, as well as in New Orleans, and she traveled extensively, so she was never geographically or culturally limited by her chosen home base."