

FAVORITE

JANICE PARKER

Landscape Architect
Photo: Sandrine Lee



Untitled
Robert Andrew Parker (b. 1927)
c. 1982, ink and watercolor on paper, 22 x 34 in.
Private collection

Every time Janice Parker, the prolific landscape architect, sees this artwork depicting a sailboat asea at dusk, she hears jazz. The black ink and watercolor painting that hangs in the family room of her home in Greenwich, Connecticut, reminds her of her ex-father-in-law, Robert Andrew Parker, who continues to make art at age 96.

“Bob is a jazz drummer, and he’s always listening to jazz as he paints,” says Janice Parker, who has watched him work for nearly 40 years in his barn/studio in Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut. In a novel characterization of his oeuvre, she refers to the artist’s ability to “play” the painting as he works: “Not unlike jazz, he’s very improvisational, unimpeded by his mind overtaking his point of view.”

As we see here, Parker often applies ink first and, prior to its drying, daubs on the watercolors. Janice Parker explains, “The ink and the paint run together, so his works are never premeditated. Rather, they’re improvised like jazz music. Bob knows exactly what he’s doing without knowing where he’s going exactly. In that sense, watercolors are the perfect medium for him.”

Family dynamics aside (she’s divorced from her first husband), Janice Parker has stayed in close touch with her former father-in-law, having known him since she was 15. Although she owns 14 of his creations, this scene in particular speaks to her strongly because it is such a foil to the work she does designing gardens and transforming land. “I work with lush, deep greens and the colors



of the earth. I rarely work with blue. Blue is a coming-and-going flower color, but not a nature color. The sunset and the moodiness of natural light are part of Bob’s lexicon, and he paints them with intelligence and emotion.”

In their broad brushwork, and in the fluid melding of lines, colors, and forms, the artist’s watercolors might appear haphazard to some, but Parker is quick to emphasize just the opposite. “As someone who’s tried to paint alongside him, and as someone who has watched him paint for decades, I can say there’s nothing at all easy about what he creates. It’s like watching Fred Astaire dance and saying, ‘Oh, I can do that,’ then realizing with your first step that you can’t.”

Because she knows him so well, Parker remains awed by the speed with which he paints. She recalls dropping into a class he was teaching at New York’s Parsons School of Design years ago. “Bob wanted to show the students how to do a portrait on the spot. He took a brown paper bag and painted my likeness on it in 10 minutes — to the students’ amazement, which they acknowledged with applause.”

During his long career — now hampered by macular degeneration — Robert Andrew Parker has taught at many institutions and illustrated numerous children’s books and novels for adults, including classics by Kafka and Joseph Heller. While he likely wouldn’t claim to rival Van Gogh, he did paint a series of canvases meant to evoke that master’s for the 1956 movie *Lust for Life*, which starred Kirk Douglas. According to Janice Parker, it is Parker’s hands, not Douglas’s, that we see on screen applying paint to canvases.

Given her work literally in and on the ground, Parker calls herself an “earthbound” person. And while she does not sail on nearby Long Island Sound, she responds to this painting for its “sense of loneliness and the way it references the mystery and vastness of the universe.” She says, “I’ve been rereading the works of [the philosopher] Joseph Campbell, who thought so much about the human journey. Bob does the same in his paintings. Seeing this one, seeing all of his paintings, makes me connect with his vision.”