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AN EXPRESSIONIST IN PARIS: JOHN ASHBERY ON JOAN MITCHELL, IN 1965

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Joan Mitchell, *Rivière*, 1990, oil on canvas.

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In honor of the Kunsthaus Bregenz's Joan Mitchell retrospective, which opens tomorrow in that Austrian city, we turn back to April 1965, when John Ashbery wrote about the work the American painter was making in Paris. At that time, Ashbery, who just came out with a new book of poetry in May, was ARTnews' Paris correspondent, and, though she was most famous in America, Mitchell was working exclusively out of Paris. (The painter first moved to Paris in 1955 and remained there until she died, at age 67, in 1992.) Mitchell's paintings differed from her Abstract Expressionist

colleagues because of their use of hot colors, and Ashbery picked up on this, noting that her palette brought her work closer to figurative representation than pure abstraction. Ashbery's full review of a show of paintings by Mitchell at Stable Gallery in New York follows in full below. — Alex Greenberger

"An Expressionist in Paris"

By John Ashbery

Joan Mitchell's new paintings, increasingly complicated and profound, are exhibited in New York this month

Joan Mitchell is one of the American artists who live in Paris for extra-artistic reasons and who are different in that way from the Americans who went to live there before the last war. They are not expatriates but apatrides. Finding Europe only slightly more congenial than America, they have stayed on for various reasons, some of them "personal"—but do artists ever have any other kind of reason? A personal reason can mean being in love or liking the food or the look of the roofs across the courtyard—or in some cases the art. The apatrides of today are usually affected by one or more of these reasons melting together and producing a rather negative feeling of being at home. Far from dreading the day when their money runs out and they have to go back to America, many of them look forward disgruntledly to it. They feel they should have gone back long ago to become successes instead of staying on in this city famous for its angry inhabitants, high living costs and lack of any sustained excitement in the contemporary arts.

Joan Mitchell is a radical example of this kind of American. Her reasons for living here are strictly personal. That is, she likes her friends, her three dogs, her studio in the plebeian quinzème, her frequent trips to the Riviera from where she goes boating to Corsica, Italy and Greece. And that's about it. She rarely goes to the theater, movies or exhibitions (except to friends' openings) and never to parties. Her social life is limited to having friends over to lunch, and sometimes going at night to one of the Montparnasse bars frequented by American painters. She has French friends but few of them are painters. In a word, she does not participate in the cultural life of Paris, and although she can be said to live and work there, the city is little more than a backdrop for these activities.



Joan Mitchell with her dog, Georges, in 1954.

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And that is perhaps the secret attraction of Paris for Americans today. Unlike New York and most other capitals, it provides a still neutral climate in which one can work pretty much as one chooses.

And it is precisely that lack of interference, even when it takes the saddening form of dealers and collectors losing sight of one, that is a force in much of the painting being done today by Americans abroad. This is perhaps less true of Joan Mitchell than of the majority of American painters in Paris, since she was established in America before to live here, and has continued to show regularly in New York and to return there for visits. Still, one feels that the calm of Paris and the fact that it is far from where the money is being made have affected her work (as well as that of Shirley Jaffe, Kimber Smith, Norman Bluhm, James Bishop, Beryl Barr, and others). The exalting and the deadening effects of an abundance of cash and action are alike absent from her work. It looks strong and relaxed, classical and refreshing at the same time; it has both the time and the will to be itself. To the strength, the capacity for immediately sizing up a situation, the instinctive knowledge of what painting is all about which characterize the best postwar art in America, the sojourn in Paris has contributed intelligence and introspection which heighten rather than attenuate these gifts. It seems that such an artist has ripened more slowly and more naturally in the Parisian climate of indifference than she might have in the intensive-care wards of New York. Joan Mitchell's new paintings [at the Stable Gallery; April 20-May 8] continue an unhurried meditation on bits of landscape and air. There are new forms, new images in this new work but no more than were needed at any given moment. For instance, one long horizontal painting uses almost unscathed planes of chalky color, their borders meandering but determined, like the lines of a watershed. A lesser painter might have been tempted to turn this discovery into a whole new vocabulary, "change his image." But these unelaborated planes happened to suit Joan Mitchell only once or twice, after which she discarded them, for the time being at least. Again, Calvi, one of a group of "new black" pictures ("although there's no black in any of them"), floats a dense, dark shape like an almost-square pentagon into the top center of the canvas. (The black in this case turns out to be dark blues and reds). But the abrupt materialization of this shape strikes few echoes in other paintings, where calligraphy, sometimes flowing, sometimes congealing, continues patiently, as though in a long letter to someone, to analyze the appearances that hold her attention the longest. (She said recently, "I'm trying to remember what I felt about a certain cypress tree and I feel if I remember it, it will last me quite a long time.")

The relation of her painting and that of other Abstract-Expressionists to nature has never really been clarified. On the one hand there are painters who threaten you if you dare let their abstract landscapes suggest a landscape. On the other hand there are painters like Joan Mitchell who are indifferent to these deductions when they are not actively encouraging them. Is one of these things better or worse than the other, and ought abstract painting to stay abstract? Things are not clarified by artists' statements that their work depicts a "feeling" about a landscape, because in

most cases such feelings closely resemble the sight which gave rise to them. What then is the difference between, say, Joan Mitchell's kind of painting and a very loose kind of landscape painting?



Joan Mitchell, Edrita Field, 1981, oil on canvas.

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There is, first, the obvious fact that the elements don't really very often add up to a legible landscape (the black pentagon in Calvi looks no more like a cave than the squares in Mondrian look like skyscraper windows—that is, a confusion might be possible because of the limited number of shapes available, but everything in the intention of the painting is there to steer one away from it). But there are cases when they do. Girolata (named after a creek in Corsica, but after the picture was painted), one of the most beautiful of Joan Mitchell's recent paintings, is a large triptych which does look very much like a fairly literal impression of the face of a cliff pocked with crevices and littered here and there with vines and messy vegetation. Even the colors—greyish mauve, light green, black—are not too far from what they would be in an explicit representation of such a scene. Is this then figurative painting, and if so what is the meaning of the term Abstract-Expressionism?

The answer seems to be that one's feelings about nature are at different removes from it. There will be elements of the things seen even in the most abstracted impression; otherwise the feeling is likely to disappear and leave an object in its place. At other times feelings remain close to the subject, which is nothing against them; in fact, feelings that leave the subject intact may be freer to develop, in and around the theme and independent of it as well. This seems to be the case in Girolata—for once the feelings were a reflection of the precise look of the creek, or cliff, or whatever; nevertheless it is this reflection rather than the memory it suggests that remains the dominating force of the painting.



Joan Mitchell, Untitled, 1964, oil on canvas.
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The proof of this is that the other, less realistic paintings in the show continue to impress us with their fidelity to what, in these cases, we can only imagine are the painter's feelings, since she does not provide us with the coordinates of a landscape to attach them to. A persistent shape, like a helmet or a horse's skull, doesn't give any clue to what the painter intended, except in one painting where it suggests dark masses of trees at the edge of a river. Elsewhere there are antagonisms and sparrings between shapes whose true nature is left unstated, and sudden lashing of caked or viscous pigment whose inspiration is again no longer in nature but in something in the nature of paint, or of the feeling that takes hold of a painter when he attacks it. Yet there is never any sense of transition; we move in and out of these episodes, coherent or enigmatic ones, always with a sense of feeling at home with the painter's language, of understanding what she is saying even when we could not translate it.

Joan Mitchell calls herself a "visual" painter. She does not talk much about her work, perhaps not out of reticence, but because the paintings are meaning and therefore do not have a residue of meaning which can be talked about. The recent upsurge of "intellectual" art and the resultant downgrading of Abstract-Expressionism do not particularly surprise or alarm her. Working in Paris, she has always been fairly independent of her fellow artists, American or French, and intends to go on as before. "There'll always be painters around," she says. "It'll take more than Pop or Op to discourage them—they've never been encouraged anyway. So we're back where we started from. There have always been very few people who really like painting—like poetry."

"I don't think you can stop visual painters and all the rest is an intellectual problem. Did you see that article on Duchamp in Time? He's thankful that intelligence has come back to art and he can't see any grey matter in Abstract-Expressionism. That's why I use a little color."

She likes ideas when they're visual, as in Jasper Johns for instance, but "that particular thing I want can't be verbalized. . . . I would like to look out of a window or at photos or pictures or at that awful thing called nature. I'm trying for something more specific than movies of my everyday life: To define a feeling."

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