In the Eye of the Tiger

Since her death in 1992 Joan Mitchell has been the subject of extensive (and very well-attended) exhibitions in France and the U.S. Here, a younger artist who experienced firsthand her impassioned, sometimes ferocious belief in painting reflects on Mitchell's complicated gifts.

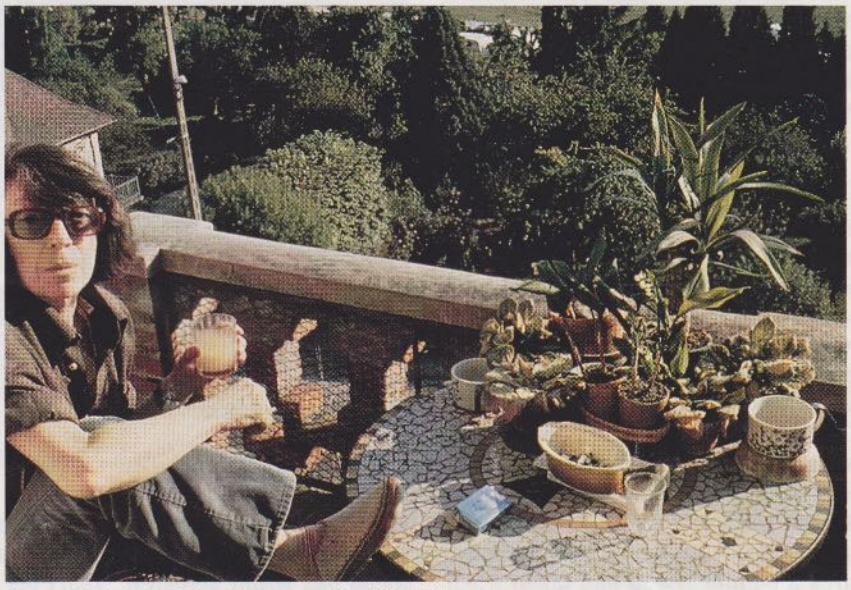
BY BILL SCOTT

Twenty years ago I visited the Jeu de Paume with one of Berthe Morisot's grandsons. He had not been there for quite a while, and seeing the paintings again prompted him to recall stories and household gossip he had heard when he was young. When we reached the rooms with Manet's paintings, he told me his mother's story of the triumph she had felt when her uncle Edouard's *Olympia* was transferred, in January 1907, from the Luxembourg Museum to the Louvre. He amusingly recalled how, as a little boy, he was most interested by her description of the painting being transported in a taxicab from one museum to the other. For many of his parents' generation, he added, that winter day was a welcome milestone in a struggle they had waged to bring increased recognition to the Impressionist painters, most of whom were gone by then.

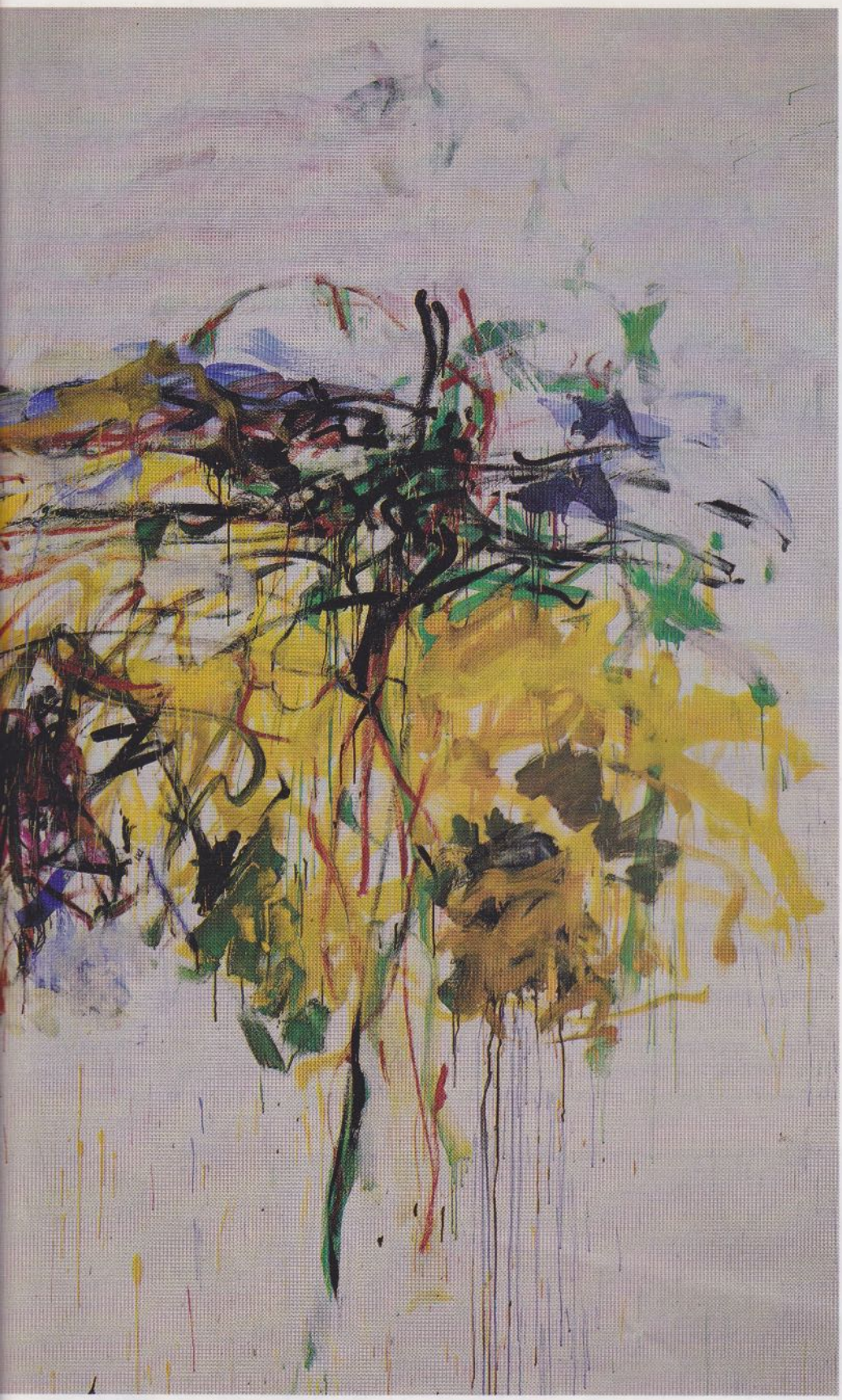
Such were a few of my thoughts when I returned last summer to the Jeu de Paume, for the first time since the Impressionists' works had been transferred to the Musée d'Orsay, to see "Joan Mitchell: The Last Years 1983-1992." Concurrent with a companion show of her earlier works at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nantes, this was the largest display of Mitchell's paintings ever assembled in France. Drawn almost entirely from her estate, the show included works so recent one could still smell the fragrance of oil paint in the galleries where they were hung. One could not help but think of how classically ironic it was that the triumph of these exhibitions occurred only after her death. At Nantes, a record was set for attendance at a summer exhibition, with over 38,000 visitors. In Paris, almost 50,000 went to the Jeu de Paume, where, at the end of the show's extended run, there were approximately 1,000 visitors each day.

Many of the works at the Jeu de Paume were familiar from Mitchell's solo exhibitions in Paris at the Galerie Jean Fournier, and some had also appeared in her 1989, 1991 and 1993 shows in New York at Robert Miller. But seeing the paintings together gave one a picture of the achievement of her last years. One could trace how she traveled from the full and sensuous imagery of the early 1980s to the sparser and more sinuous kind of line that had existed in her earliest works and begins to reappear in *Faded Air* (1985). Much, if not all, of Mitchell's work is inspired by landscape. The sheer physicality with which she applied her paint might make you forget the visual source, but she brings you immediately back to it with her titles: *River IV* and *V* (1986), *Rain* (1989), *Champs* (Fields, 1990), *Sunflowers* (1990-91) and *Tilleul* (Linden Tree, 1992).

I was first led to Joan in 1980, when I was 23 and staying in Paris. A friend had introduced me to some students from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts; all of them painted abstractly, and I remember being surprised when we spoke of contemporary abstract painting (which they all professed to love) that they had never heard of or seen works by either Richard Diebenkorn or Joan Mitchell. Both of these artists, expatriates of sorts from the New York art world, were like beacons for me and the company I kept back in the States. One Beaux-Arts student did know her name, but he was a bit stunned to learn



Joan Mitchell in Vetheuil, France, May 15, 1980. Photo Bill Scott.



Untitled, 1992, oil on canvas, diptych: 110¼ by 141¾ inches overall. © The Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

they were staying. She could quickly turn tougher than anyone I'd ever met or imagined, sometimes warning first-time visitors, "Don't make me angry." On those occasions when she became fiercely analytical and psychologically cruel, she called herself, as she told everyone, "Big Joan."

However, the times I cherished with her were when, full of curosity, delight and wonderment for the pleasures of painting, she was Little Joan. After the late-night TV news, serenaded by the howls of her three German shepherds, Little Joan sang childhood songs as the four of them, in the moonlight, ambled up the incline to her studio behind the house. There, in the sanctuary of that room, the rest of the world fell away as she would show her newest paintings, one by one, to those who had stayed.

The large scale of most of her paintings, which measure up to 9 by 26 feet, virtually prohibits a full-scale retrospective of these works. That said, the Jeu de Paume's decision to devote its entire space to just 66 paintings, of various sizes, executed during one period of her life, seems the best available alternative.

The few older artists I'd met through her usually preferred and praised her earliest paintings, which were her most viscerally calligraphic and, to my eyes, her angriest. The show at Nantes, which included 55 works from the first 30 years of her career, provided only a brief look at this period, which lasted from 1950 to around 1965. For example, there were just two paintings, an untitled canvas and *Chicago*, to represent an exquisite series of works to which the Robert Miller Gallery recently devoted an entire exhibition, "Joan Mitchell: . . . my black paintings . . . : 1964." (In fact, the Miller show, which included 14 paintings from a single year, was much closer, in its comprehensiveness, to the show at the Jeu de Paume.) The small five-panel painting *Little Trip* (1969), a larger untitled vertical and *The sky is blue, the grass is green* (1972), all executed after her move to Vetheuil, feel more like landscape than most representational landscape paintings do. It was in Vetheuil that, in the tradition of French painting, Mitchell became a great colorist. By engaging fully with color, she veered away from the classic boundaries of Abstract Expressionism while at the same time expanding them. And as Storr writes, "Mitchell demonstrated that she wholly grasped what all genuine traditionalists must know, namely that the only true way to show respect for the old is to make it new."

The first time I went to Joan's house, in 1980, she walked me around her garden. Pausing by a tiny pool of water lilies, she complained bitterly about the critics who compared her paintings to Monet's. She didn't consider him to be a colorist, nor, she tersely added, did she care for the restored gardens at Giverny. The evening after visiting there, she recalled, she had come home and painted the most beautiful late Monet water lily she had ever

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that "Joan" Mitchell, unlike "Joan" Miró, was not a man. He told me of a forthcoming show of her work in Paris, at the Galerie Jean Fournier; by chance I later walked in as the exhibition was being hung. Joan, with an engaging familiarity toward everyone present, was scrutinizing her just completed four-panel painting, *The Goodbye Door* (1980), which, at 9⅛ by 23⅝ feet, was too large, she said, for her to spread out and really see in her studio. She liked how it looked, and, in a good mood, she told me to come for lunch and see where she painted. Thereafter, I joined a few other American painters who, each summer, beat a path to her home in Vetheuil, outside of Paris. Except for occasional phone calls, a rare letter and a few quick, turbulent visits when she was in New York for one of her shows, it was during the evenings with Joan in Vetheuil that I got to know her. I sensed that it was surprising to some of her contemporaries that so many younger artists had chosen Joan as a hero despite her chronic heavy drinking and quarrelsome personality.

Of her early years in New York with the Abstract Expressionists, Robert Storr writes in the Jeu de Paume's exhibition catalogue, "Into this tight, argumentative enclave, Mitchell made her entrance like Katherine Hepburn walking into a saloon. Unlike Hepburn, however, she kept up with the men by adopting their combative manners. [She was always] ready for any verbal or social challenge." And of her later years he says, "Instead of being a quick-start talent enlisted in an already triumphant movement—a second-wave but, thus, implicitly, a second-class artist—Mitchell, despite her early achievements, was in many ways a late bloomer who, boosted by a powerful second wind, ended up in a class by herself."

All who knew Joan felt they had a unique personal relationship with her. When I was sad or lonely, Joan encouragingly barked, "Paint! Paint!" Painting was the great healer. She pushed us all to explore our desires and to confront our anxieties, but her eyes were more critical than most, and she demanded excellence all the time. I laughed at the preemptive measures a painter friend had taken when sending Joan an announcement to her upcoming show. Fearing the diatribe she would be subjected to if the painting reproduced on the card did not meet with Joan's approval, my friend had simply scribbled, "Don't tell me. I know."

One learned never to take the good times with her for granted. After intense dinners that could be fodder for harrowingly dramatic novels, those guests who couldn't accept the invitation to stay until morning usually high-tailed it back to Paris, Giverny or to wherever

Little Rain, *1989, oil on canvas, diptych: 16¼ by 21¼ inches overall. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery. All works this spread © The Estate of Joan Mitchell.*

seen. Disgusted at the recognition, she had then stayed up until dawn to scrape it completely from her canvas so she could begin again.

That painting, resurrected, might be *Garden for Audrey* (1979), a heavily worked piece that seems like a cornerstone in Mitchell's work—recapitulating her earlier, signature marks while anticipating all that was to come. Together with *The Goodbye Door* (1980), *No Daisies* (1980) and *Cobalt* (1981), it served as the finale to the Nantes show. These are some of her classic works, and all, with the exception of *Garden for Audrey*, were included in the far more comprehensive survey of her early years that was part of the 1988 retrospective organized by Cornell University.

It was just slightly later, when she painted the seductively lush series of 16 verdant canvases called "La Grande Vallée," that she cemented her link to Monet. These works, with which the Jeu de Paume exhibition commenced, will have critics mentioning him in their articles on Mitchell forever.

This association, despite what she might have proclaimed, was not entirely unwarranted, nor, I think, uninvited. I remember her once pointing to a clearing on the hill behind her studio and insisting, erroneously, that this was where Monet had painted a woman holding a parasol and walking behind a child through a field of poppies. She was unaware (or perhaps just didn't care) that the Monet is called *Poppies at Argenteuil* and that it was painted in 1873, several years before Monet had come to Vetheuil. A little reproduction of it hung, along with several other Monets, in her kitchen, and on occasion she would pull out postcards she had collected of paintings he had done of Vetheuil when he lived in the house below the one she later occupied.

Although Monet had lived in Vetheuil 90 years prior to Mitchell's move there, the view from her balcony appeared virtually unchanged from the one Monet had depicted. Most of the people who wrote about Joan had met her, and many had visited her home. Yet I know of none who ever bothered to walk up the hill behind her studio, where there was a small forest she liked—trees and overgrown, tangled vines that could have easily inspired any number of her works. Few seemed to care or even realize that the particularities of this locale, rather than Monet's depictions of it, most influenced her. It is an overwhelming landscape, and the breathtaking view from her balcony—of the Seine, the passing barges, the lake beyond the river and the village in the distance—never failed to elicit comment.

Storr writes, "The years in Vetheuil rewrote the critical equation which held her reputation in check." And he adds, "It was feminism that began the process of reevaluating her importance at the very time in the 1970's when the decreed death of painting seemed to have come woefully true." Still, I was disappointed that so many of Joan's obituaries were laced with rote comparisons to Monet, as she had predicted. One can only infer that the surest course to faint-praise damnation, particularly for a woman, is to be a colorist straightforwardly striving for the beautiful—as if that alone is grounds enough to call her work derivative.

Little Trip, *1969, oil on canvas, 5 panels: 16 by 54⅛ inches overall. Courtesy Galerie Jean Fournier.*

Garden for Audrey, *1979, oil on canvas, diptych: 99½ by 141¾ inches overall. Courtesy Galerie Jean Fournier.*

She browbeat all of us—but younger women in particular—with how difficult it was, especially in France, for a woman to be respected as an artist.

Her observations made me again recall Morisot's grandson, who had told me of his mother's angry deathbed demand that no more paintings from her collection go to the Louvre. His mother was furious and hurt, he said, because so many of Morisot's works that she and others had given to the museum remained relegated to storage. Reluctantly noting that most were still rarely if ever exhibited, he drew the same conclusion as his mother regarding the abiding sexism of the French art world.

God help anyone who called Joan "a lady painter." She was reluctant to align herself with other women artists past or present. And, knowing that I liked Morisot's works, Joan used to needle me, saying that she felt Morisot's landscapes and gardens were "awfully brushy"—words that Joan was rather sensitive to herself. Joan preferred Cézanne, Manet, Matisse and, perhaps most of all, van Gogh. She had always carried in her mind's eye the paintings by these artists that she had seen at the Art Institute of Chicago as a child. One of her favorite dreams, she once told me, was of meeting Cézanne. The work of van Gogh, whose "violence" she liked, had inspired various "Sunflower" paintings throughout her career. And in 1989, responding to his painting called *Rain* (1889), from the Philadelphia Museum, she had done an entire series of variations, including *Rain* and *Little Rain*.

Whether or not you painted abstractly, Joan was quick to scold you if she felt your brushstrokes looked rendered or too representational, and she tried to herd us away from interpreting her own paintings in such terms. No doubt her need to mask some of the representational elements in her imagery came partly out of her association with the Abstract Expressionists during her years in New York. "This group," Storr writes, "was both intimately interdependent and fiercely competitive. Who had arrived at abstraction early, Pollock and de Kooning, and who had arrived 'late,' Kline and Guston, was a matter of intense polemic and contested ranking."

She was always curious to know how someone had done something that she didn't do, such as painting on Mylar, working with collage or even painting a single-panel horizontal work—something she claimed was difficult for her. She also stressed how important she felt it was to be accurate with color, warning us (but, I thought, really reminding herself) never to settle for a color you've mixed on your palette unless it is exactly what you want. Never compromise, she insisted. To make a point on color she might, for example, hold a lemon against a black patch on the coat of one of her dogs and say that this color juxtaposition, for her, epitomized Manet. Or at dinner she might challenge anyone to tell her how they would mix the color of an apple she held, the color of her drink or the red of her

Tilleul, *1992, oil on canvas, diptych: 110¼ by 157½ inches overall. All works this spread © The Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.*

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sweater. She became your tormenter if she felt you were using color without "seeing" it or painting without "feeling."

In a spirit more of challenge than of competition, Joan gave great practical painting advice. And she wasn't above going back to her own work, sometimes painting specifically to emphasize a visual point she was trying to make. One afternoon, for example, she appeared with a tiny blue, brown, black and gray painting "of the Eiffel Tower" that she had painted the previous night following an argument about the proper use of earth colors. She presented it as a gift to her reluctant opponent, proclaiming that by studying it the painter might improve her own sense of color accordingly. The unhappy recipient was so rattled by the end of her long visit that she left the present behind, as she explained to me later, "just to spite her."

As contagious as Little Joan's love of painting could be, Big Joan's need to compete was compulsive and unrelenting. Inevitably, she did drive away some wonderful people. But our admiration for her work was what drew us back. There was no way to prepare someone for the experience of meeting her, and when it went badly everyone knew it. Joan's sting could linger on in me for months. Two days after she died, I spoke with a friend who said, "I went to my studio yesterday and I felt free for the first time." Later, I felt my friend's comment to have been rather prophetic, as most of us have since done our best work. The poster for Joan's exhibition, which had been placed in Metro stations throughout Paris, proclaimed, "The Jeu de Paume is the only place where the paintings roar more loudly than the visitors." Before I saw the show I couldn't help but think whoever had written that must surely have known her. And yet, when I did visit the exhibition, looking at her last series and her final painting of sunflowers and the one of her linden tree, I realized that of course the words on the poster were absolutely true. I sometimes miss the long nights in her studio and what Storr refers to as "her rough talk and sharp impatience with aesthetic pretensions and platitudes." For some of us, she revitalized and, perhaps, even resurrected painting. And no matter where painting goes from here, Joan Mitchell nourished us with a belief that painting can still be a terribly important thing to do. □

"Joan Mitchell, oeuvres de 1951 à 1982" was on view at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes [June 24-Sept. 26, 1994]. "Joan Mitchell: les dernières années (1983-1994)" appeared at the Galeries Nationales du Jeu de Paume, Paris [June 22-Sept. 15, 1994], and "Joan Mitchell: . . . my black paintings . . . : 1964" at Robert Miller Gallery, New York [Oct. 11-Nov. 12, 1994].

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