Expressing the Abstract

There used to be much made of the difference between content and subject matter. This was, of course, a telling argument for abstraction: you could be saying something important without directly depicting it. In fact, many mid-20th century American artists were convinced that getting too close to a subject was a pretty sure way of emptying it of any real meaning, a descent into naming rather than an ascent into embodiment. Today, in an artistic age that seems to place a particularly high value on the act of communication, it's not surprising to find enthusiasm for accessibility and unabashedly comprehensible subject matter. Confronted with works by Damien Hirst or Andres Serrano you may not like what you see, but you certainly know what you are looking at. Joan Mitchell's paintings, 69 of which were shown in her recent retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art make a strong case for the validity of that older paradigm, but returning to that flame of mind is not so simple. The tilt toward referentiality is widespread and subtle, and it has become a part (both in the making and interpreting) of much of today's art, abstraction included. It's also affected the way we view the recent past. While it is not difficult to see that Minimalism changed the way we regard Barnett Newman's work, or that the installation art of the last decade or so has heightened the emotional aura of many of Dan Flavin's ostensibly dispassionate pieces, the interpretive status of Mitchell's paintings-and, for that matter, much of the gestural abstraction of her time-occupies a far more ambiguous territory.

Mitchell's work both resists and courts referentiality. How can we, for example, not see the architectural underpinnings of the earliest painting in the show, *Cross Section of a Bridge* (1951), or avoid dealing with landscape when she titles paintings *Blue Tree, My Landscape II* or *Low Water,* and makes repeated statements on the order of, "It comes from and is about landscape, not about me"? [i] Yet notwithstanding the clues scattered through the paintings and titles, there is, at heart, something stubbornly self-contained about these works. Paint and gesture operate on their own, engendering a visual language specific to those paintings and to that artist.

Approaching Mitchell's oeuvre from a historical point of view can be tricky. We've seen work like this before, and, as such, we can fit it into a stylistic, chronological schema. Mitchell's paintings fall right in the center of gestural Abstract Expressionism. We can chart the influences and affinities - Gorky, de Kooning, Kline, Guston, Hofmann, Sam Francis, and back to Mondrian, Monet, Cézanne and van Gogh. In addition, over the years many of us have spent time with Mitchell's work in museums and galleries. History then gives us a region of familiarity in which to locate her art, but familiarity and understanding can often run on parallel tracks. The accumulation of fact and contextual knowledge makes for a particular sort of uncertainty, an overly precise knowing. History is an unstable entity, and large-scale exhibitions such as this form something new. Having these works-all but six of them of imposing scale-together, watching them speak to each other, changes them. The work that we thought we knew becomes less familiar, less categorizable, less historicized.

Mitchell, who died of lung cancer in 1992 at the age of 66, was a central and lively figure in the art world. There has been much made of her difficult personality: her anger, alcoholism, sharp tongue and general orneriness. While she might have been more aggressively outspoken than others, in my experience a good many artists, successful or not, are excessively self-involved, irritable, insecure and demanding, and alcoholism is hardly unknown in the art world, especially among Mitchell's generation. But the issue of bad behavior rarely comes up, except in pathologically theatrical cases, like Jackson Pollock's. One wonders, would Mitchell's personality be such a popular topic for discussion if she had been a man? Mitchell may have been successful, but for much of her life she had to function in a professional environment where being a woman didn't exactly help a person's career.

Something that did help was that she was rich and well connected. She was raised in Chicago by a father who was a leading dermatologist and a mother who, in addition to being heir to a considerable fortune, was coeditor of the influential literary monthly *Poetry*. Mitchell grew up in comfortable circumstances, honed her competitive instincts in sports, winning junior championships in tennis and figure skating, and lived in a home where people on the order of Thornton Wilder (who read poems to her and her sister), Dylan Thomas and T.S.Eliot came to visit. She studied at Smith and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she familiarized herself with the museum's first-rate collection of 19th-and 20th-century French paintings. Although as an adult she lived modestly, having money meant avoiding certain time and energy-draining compromises. Granted that life, especially bohemian life, was cheaper in her heyday,

Mitchell never had to work at a job, could travel when she wished, was able to live in France and still keep a place in New York, could afford good quality art supplies and did not have to be financially dependent on a man. This sort of autonomy was not insignificant, particularly for a woman of her generation. The default setting, so to speak, was that a woman artist was not really serious. This expectation had to be resisted, and the way to do that was to work without interruption.

Mitchell was also a beneficiary of Abstract Expressionism's success. Arriving in New York toward the end of the 1940s, Mitchell, then in her early 20s, sought out de Kooning and Kline, and deepened her friendship with Guston, whom she had met previously during a trip to Paris. The art scene in New York was small, and soon she knew virtually everyone. A hard-drinking, hard-swearing tough cookie, she hung out at the Cedar Street tavern with the boys, became a member of the Artists' Club, and in 1951 was invited to participate in the important Ninth Street exhibition organized by the Artists' Club with the assistance of the art dealer Leo Castelli. That same year she was included in the Whitney Annual and, within a reasonably short time, began her solo exhibition career. By 1953 was a member of the highly regarded Stable Gallery.

That she was prodigiously talented is clear – no amount of money in the bank or determination to befriend the right people would have carried the day without the requisite artistic ability and the commitment to producing work not only in quantity, but at the proper heroic Abstract Expressionist scale. Although she disliked being thought of as a member of the Second Generation of Abstract Expressionism – a rather arbitrary distinction[ii] -- she gained important advantages by arriving on the scene when she did.

Not only was there an established avant-garde milieu in which to ground herself, but the esthetic parameters had already been set – parameters that she accepted and within whose bounds she remained throughout her life. That she was one of the few who was able to keep gestural Abstract Expressionism vital through the early '90s, deepening and expanding it, is a testament both to her ability as an artist and to the ongoing challenges offered by that particular approach to painting.

Having an esthetic in place meant that the young Mitchell could hit the ground running. *Although Cross Section of a Bridge*, with its mix of tumbling planes and torqued, partially bounded biomorphic passages, brings to mind a number of earlier European sources, the painting seems to take its real inspiration from Arshile Gorky's work, as does a 6-by-6 ½ foot untitled painting of the same year. Gorky, who began his career in the 1920s, fought his way through and clear of Cubism and Surrealism, arriving at his mature output only in the early 1940s. With Mitchell, that struggle for stylistic identity remained at a remove, and her paintings are none the worse for having had others do some of the groundwork.

While sweating Picasso out of one's system, as Gorky did, proved for him and many others to be a cathartic experience, it was the quieter influence of Mondrian, in particular his plus-and-minus series that seemed to prevail for Mitchell. At the Whitney, this was evident in an early untitled work dated 1953-54,which employs the muted, silvery-tan palette Mondrian favored in the teens, as well as his overall rhythmic patterning. In the early Cubist manner, the composition avoids activity at the corners,

contracting into a rough oval with the suggestion of centered axes. The short marks, both stroked and dripped, emphatically accent the horizontal and vertical. The painting displays little tonal variation but a considerable sense of shimmering atmosphere.

There is also a relation to Guston's work of the 1950s, but Mitchell's paintings from the period feel more deliberate and structured. Although Mitchell soon began making paintings that were closer to de Kooning's and the Action-painting wing of Abstract Expressionism, the considered, even planned quality evident in these early paintings persisted throughout her career. Mitchell's tamped-down, self-contained quality is, I believe, one of the great strengths of her paintings and may have helped her sustain her gestural approach much longer than expressionist colleagues such as Jack Tworkov and Alfred Leslie.

Mitchell's production is remarkable for its consistency. From the very beginning of her professional career, she painted with assurance, vigor and grace. Her works from 1956, however, cemented her stylistic ties to de Kooning. Paintings like *Hemlock* or *King of Spades* share de Kooning's roughed-in structural lattice, energetic brushwork, and also, importantly, the use of larger, neutral color areas (white, in these two paintings) that function simultaneously as ground, space-defining curved plane and a means of erasure. The colored brushstrokes are not simply placed on a backdrop, but are embedded-sometimes obscured, sometimes emerging-in an active field. This material as well as perceptual interchange between figure and ground is a feature of not only de Kooning's black-and-white work (especially late'40s and early' 50s paintings like *Excavation* and *Attic*) but also Kline's paintings, which Mitchell greatly admired.

The year 1957 was a particularly good one for Mitchell. She had her fourth solo exhibition at the Stable Gallery and was included in the Whitney Annual, the Corcoran Biennial and important exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Jewish Museum and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. In October, *Art News* published Irving Sandler's article "Mitchell paints a picture" (to be chosen for one of that magazine's "paints a picture" features was a sure sign that you had made it the art world of the 1950s). The picture in question was *George Went Swimming at Barnes Hole, but It Got Too Cold* (1957), a painting that was bought by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo the following year. "George" was a standard black poodle she had owned (dogs figured prominently in Mitchell's life) and Barnes Hole is a bay beach in East Hampton, N.Y., a town where she summered in the early '50s. Those summers, often spent in the company of the painter Michael Goldberg, were emotionally tumultuous but important to her artistic development. *George Went Swimming*, executed in her studio on St. Mark's Place in New York, seems to reflect a mix of turmoil and pleasure. Sandler felt, based on his discussions with Mitchell, that this painting was, in part, an attempt to capture the experience of a storm on water. She had already painted four canvases in response to a hurricane that had hit East Hampton in 1954,and Sandler believed that this painting was a return to that theme. Mitchell had grown up in Chicago in an apartment overlooking Lake Michigan, and, as Sandler wrote, "It seemed that the hurricane … invaded the picture. Since her early childhood lake storms have been a frightening symbol both of devastation and attraction, and the sense of tempestuous waters appears frequently in her work."[iii]

While *George Went Swimming* is scarcely a literal depiction of water, it recapitulates a remembrance of, and a reaction to, nature. Sandler says of her work in general, "She appears to have been driven to recapture in her abstractions, the intensity of emotions associated with certain scenes in the past. As she once said about a work: 'I'm trying to remember what I felt about a certain cypress tree.'"[iv]

The exhibition's curator, Jane Livingston, in her catalogue essay, speaks of Mitchell's "strange inarticulateness" when it came to talking about her work. "She kept insisting that feeling a place, transforming a memory, recording something specifically recalled from experience, with all its intense light and joy and perhaps anguish, was what she was doing. She seemed to assume that everyone would understand what she meant." [v] Mitchell's rhetoric may seem imprecise, but it speaks to the very distance that abstraction establishes between the painting and the subject, and reflects the multiplicity or blurring of intentions around which her work is structured. In Mitchell's hands, landscape elements, however stylized, can convey feeling, form, memory and a depiction simultaneously.

George Went Swimming, a vertical painting approximately 7 feet by 6 ½ feet, is divided roughly into two sections, with the larger one occupying the top two-thirds of the canvas, and the other the bottom third. Centered in each of these sections is a welter of straight brushstrokes placed on opposing diagonals, giving the composition a kind of two-point perspective, a sense of being anchored in space. The strokes are, for the most part, brightly colored, with reds, yellows, turquoises and cobalt blues predominating, although slashes of darker tones are woven in. The colored areas are set

in a brushy and cool white field, which intensifies their chromatic impact. A zone of smeared blue pushes in from the upper right corner, destabilizing the composition, giving the brushwork it impinges on a frenetic quality. The painting alternates markedly between warm and cool, evoking heated air and frigid water, the weather's changeability and, by implication, restlessness and uncertainty.

Ladybug (1957), long a fixture of the Museum of Modern Art's collection (it was acquired in 1961), shares elements with *George Went Swimming*. Its format, however, is a pronounced horizontal, as opposed to a squarish vertical, and its organization is allover. There is a landscape feel to this painting as well, but in comparison to *George Went Swimming*, the strokes are more on the horizontal, particularly at the top, where they tend to be more densely compacted, in the way that the distance between objects seems to decrease the farther away they are from the viewer. The painting expands and loosens up at the bottom, with thicker marks, larger white areas, and strokes that release cascades of delicate drips. *Ladybug* feels calmer than *George Went Swimming*, its allover quality neutralizing opposing compositional vectors, its tonal range more subdued. This is not to say that Ladybug is anything but a tough, gritty New York painting. Its raw edges are there, but it teeters and tips rather than lurches. This is the calm after the storm.

Mitchell had been visiting France regularly since 1955, but by 1959, she had, to all intents and purposes, relocated, and her work from then on was mostly created

there. She found a studio on the rue Frémincourt, in Paris's 15th arrondissement, and painted in it for the next nine years. She kept that studio until the 1970s,even though by 1968 she lived in Vetheuil, in the countryside north of Paris, overlooking the Seine .It was a beautiful house and property with an artistic history: a smaller house on the grounds, later to serve as the gardener's cottage, was where Claude Monet had lived and worked from 1878 to 1881.

The earlier Abstract Expressionists made much of their artistic identity as Americans. Although some of them were European by birth, as mature artists they tended to stay clear of the continent. Their reluctance or inability to travel there was due in part to the Depression and World War II, but it was also a function of their belief that they were doing something that had not been done before, something that flourished on American soil. Europe, and France in particular, was the competition, and they did not expect to be received there with open arms. Second Generation artists were considerably more relaxed on that score, and postwar Paris hosted a large and lively American contingent. Mitchell, difficult as she might have been, had a real talent for friendship. Among those she was especially close to in Paris were the American abstractionists Norman Bluhm, Sam Francis and Shirley Jaffe. She also began a long and stormy relationship with the Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle, which lasted until 1979. Mitchell was close with many writers there as well, and Samuel Beckett became a lifelong friend.

Living in France, as might be expected, changed Mitchell's work. She was now resident in a country with a long and deep painting tradition. She was also a foreigner,

with all the potential for alienation that creates. While welcoming creative people from outside it, especially those who can pay their own way, French society, rarely grants them bona fide French status. Many of the paintings in the Whitney exhibition that date from the early to the mid-'60s show a noticeable change in approach from the earlier New York work. They seem to be constructed neither as evenly weighted allover compositions, nor as tensely structured sums of opposing forces, but as more traditional figure-ground arrangements. They feature visually heavy accretions of mass, placed somewhat awkwardly off center, cradled by often tenuously stroked marks and blurred atmospheric passages. The compositions feel as if they are simultaneously clumping up and unraveling.

In *Calvi* (1964), for example, a bulky near-rectangle of scraped and clotted dark cypress-green floats in the upper portion of the 8 by 7 ½ foot canvas. Surrounded by a veil of smudged and sullied pale pinks and yellows that darken it even more, the hovering form-derived from groupings of dark trees seen while Mitchell was sailing in the Mediterranean-appears to have drifted to the right, pulled off its tangled sticklike green moorings. There is a sense of difficulties stated but not solved. *Calvi*, somewhat mournfully, stares you down. The painting displays certain formal similarities to Rothko's work, but it has none of his politesse. Both painters float their shapes, but Rothko's are held firmly in check, both structurally and emotionally. Rothko has the air of permanence achieved; Mitchell, of permanence longed for.

At the end of the '60s,Mitchell's paintings took another turn. They became lighter in visual weight and considerably more elegant. Where her earlier paintings

seemed in large part to be composed of distinct brushstrokes, and much of the work of the early to mid-'60s consisted of big, congealed forms set against disordered fields, her new work took groups of more or less rectangular shapes of varying sizes and jostled them up against each other in brushed and dripped fields. Her palette grew more complex and sophisticated-replete with lavenders, juicy oranges, translucent celadons, glowing viridians, wine reds and a range of blues from deep ultramarine to pale sky. Although she denied it, Hans Hofmann's influence seems evident in this work. As great as Hofmann's achievement may be, in these paintings I believe that Mitchell outdoes him. Hofmann carries with him the authority of the European Cubist apparatus - it gives his expressionism a kind of gravity (in both senses of the term), but Mitchell's paintings of this period, like *Low Water* (1969) or *Salut Sally* (1970), bring something else to bear - the pleasure-oriented, intimate, color-driven, French landscape tradition of Matisse and Bonnard. This allows her to do something very un-Hofmann-like – to let her forms be dissolved by light and space. The dark blue rectangle at the top of *Salut Sally*, for example, seems to crumble into a lake of finely and actively brushed lighter blue, and simultaneously to be submerged and reflected in its surface. Wedges of dark blue emphasize the bottom left of the canvas, and a lighter, green-blue section hugs the left edge of the painting just above those wedges. These blues anchor the painting and set up a charged, perspectivally deep arena that allows for an airy play of yellows, pinks, whites, oranges and a few greens within its precincts. The stepped rectilinear structuring of its planar components further adds to the painting’s sense of depth, as does the carefully modulated advance and recession of the colored planes.

In these works, Mitchell is able to convey intimacy even when she dramatically ups the scale. In *Wet Orange* (1971-72), a triptych measuring 9 ½' x 20 feet, the canvas is filled, edge to edge, with a jumble of loosely rectangular forms. Brushwork, primarily in orange, at once vigorous and delicate, plays itself out in those forms– sometimes making the rectangle, sometimes indicating its edge, and at other times obscuring it in a soft thicket of strokes. Your eye may move freely around the general design of the painting, but the brushwork draws you close to it, physically and emotionally. It holds you and slows you down.

Because of practical studio considerations Mitchell could not manage really large works painted on a single stretcher. Her solution was to use multi-panel formats; diptychs, triptychs, and even on occasion, four-panel paintings. These grand, horizontal works (the biggest in the show, *Salut Tom* [1979] is slightly over 26 feet in length) make a virtue out of what could be a limitation. Rather than acting as if the canvas division were nonexistent, Mitchell plays off interruption against continuity. Sometimes a mark effortlessly jumps the border, while at other times forms stop at one canvas's edge and a new passage begins at the next. This can be done boldly or with extreme subtlety, as in *La Vie en Rose* (1979), where the painted white ground of the far left panel butts up against the slightly grayer and duller white of the primed but unpainted ground of the adjacent canvas – the dissonance all the more telling for being played so softly.

In Mitchell's multi-part paintings the panels were worked separately, but were meant to be seen together. Each panel has a visual autonomy that, paradoxically, enhances the painting's sense of unity. The painting has come together, like states

voluntarily joining to form a country, rather than being unified a priori. Vertical panels link up to form a larger horizontal, but they still retain their compositional verticality; not just in terms of the panels' configuration, but in the largely upright orientation of the internal forms and strokes within each panel. A contrapuntal musicality abounds. Themes are stated, varied and played off each other, increasing the paintings' feeling of wholeness and rightness, but diminishing the sense of all-at-once perception that gives Pollock's similarly scaled paintings their urgency. These are slower, more carpentered works than Pollock's, with an increased part-to-whole read; and what Mitchell's paintings may lose in immediacy they gain in reflectiveness.

Panoramic and abstractly narrative, canvases of this scale can't help but bring to mind Monet's mural-sized Waterlilies, although Monet's muted tonal contrast in those works is at odds with Mitchell's more full-blown use of color. Mitchell rejected comparisons to Monet-that they had lived in the same place only seemed to increase Mitchell's desire to disassociate herself-but to my way of thinking, there is an especially strong connection to Monet in her "La Grande Vallée" cycle, a suite of 21 paintings executed from 1983 to 1984. The inspiration for the group was a beautiful hidden valley in Brittany that had served as a childhood refuge or a close friend, Gisèle Barreau. Mitchell's only sister, Sally, died in 1982, as did Barreau's young cousin ,with whom she had played in the valley. Mitchell was preoccupied with and quite afraid of death (and abandonment-even in social situations she had an aversion to prolonged good-byes). She threw herself into this suite of paintings, almost as if this re-creation of an Eden,

imagined but unseen, would keep death at bay. The "Grande Vallée" paintings are particularly lush, even at times suffocatingly so. Defined forms have disappeared and paint fills the canvas from edge to edge, with little of the white breathing space of Mitchell's other works. The brushstrokes are compact and overlaid. In many of the paintings *(La Grande Vallée XIII*,1983,for example), a rich, cobalt blue predominates, serving as a foil for massings of floral yellows and leaf greens. While I admire the intensity of these paintings, they seem, in a way, too sure of themselves, "resolutions of the resolved," as Clement Greenberg said of certain late Monets.[vi]

The "Grande Vallée" group was quite well received. Although Mitchell had two significant museum shows in the'70s - at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse in 1972 and at the Whitney in 1974 - and was showing at the Xavier Fourcade Gallery in New York and at the Galerie Jean Fournier in Paris (both prestigious venues), the reception of her work of that period was somewhat muted. Whether this was a result of a general lessening of interest in the art of her generation or a response to the work itself is debatable. It should be remembered that at the time Greenberg exerted a powerful influence in the art world, especially in regard to painting, and Greenberg was not a supporter of hers.

In any case, by the time that the "Grande Vallée" group appeared, her accomplishment had been gaining greater recognition. A 1980 show at Fourcade, "Joan Mitchell: The Fifties, Important Paintings," brought back into view some of her most powerful early works. These included *King of Spades* (1956) and *Evenings at Seventy-third Street* (1956-57), both of which were in the Whitney show, and the very important

To the Harbormaster (1957), based on a poem by her friend, Frank O'Hara, which was not shown. The early '80s were also the time of a renewed interest in large-scale gestural painting. The works of artists such as Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer and Julian Schnabel lent Mitchell's a renewed credence. Their emotive, subject-driven and often series-based work also helped attune viewers and critics to Mitchell's sense of referentiality in ways that earlier figurative Abstract-Expressionist work like Elaine de Kooning's or Fairfield Porter's had not. Mitchell was no longer an exponent of a previous style, but an experienced practitioner of a current mode of expression. It is of interest to note that although styles have been recapitulated often enough in the last 20 years, conceivably well-intentioned but ultimately pejorative terms like "Second Generation" have not been used. Modifiers like "Neo" or "Post" carry far less negative weight. It is also encouraging to see that the work of Mitchell's contemporaries Goldberg and Bluhm has received more recognition in recent years.

As Mitchell moved into what would be the last phase of her career, she was able to bring all of her skills into play, and, despite serious illness and loss, her ambition, inventiveness, and productivity did not slacken. Mitchell's health problems were severe and would no doubt have stopped a less indomitable type. But her late paintings are as determinedly physical as anything she did before. Her strokes, always rigorous, took on a looser, more wristy feel. Sometimes her marks formed themselves into crumpled, ball-like shapes, as in *Sunflowers* (1990-91), and sometimes into centrally massed but still airy agglomerations, as in the "Chord" group, represented in the Whitney show by

Chord VII (1987). At other times they seemed to exist as flurries of energy, shaking themselves loose of any readily evident structure, as in *Faded Air I* (1985).

Her color became, if anything, more daring. *Sunflowers* for instance, is shot through with hot pink and tangerine orange, an insinuation of tropical warmth into an otherwise chromatically sedate atmosphere. The last painting in the show, an untitled diptych from 1992, the year of her death, feels emblematic of the arc of Mitchell's work. In this roughly 9-by-12-foot painting, two loosely tangled skeins of glowing golden yellow oppose each other, one per panel. They are set in a white, nearly empty field and trail delicate, almost calligraphic streamers of color. The painting, full of tough wistfulness, evokes Cy Twombly's later work and seems to suggest, at the very end of her career, a new direction. Mitchell knew what she knew, but within that arena of competence, she was never afraid to push it.

Abstract Expressionism was full of talk of risk, of how a painting could go wrong in an instant, where one untrue move could lose it all for you. Much of that rhetoric was '50s bravado - the artist as matador, not bricklayer. Things changed in the '60s, and the equating of Action painting and authenticity became less and less tenable. In 1966, Lawrence Alloway pointed out that repetitive geometric painting could be at least as personal and expressive as gestural painting: "A system is as human as a splash of paint, more so when the splash gets routinized."[vii] Alloway's view proved to be a useful corrective. Robert Mangold's conceptually generated paintings could be seen as fully

expressive, and a lot of essentially academic paint splattering and esthetic heavy breathing was unmasked. Mitchell, however, was the real thing. She never let her marks become "routinized," she never merely went through the motions. But then, she rarely failed - a sign to her detractors that she had not pushed herself hard enough.

This argument can only be countered by recourse to the works themselves. In a career that spanned over 40 years, she was amazingly prolific and consistent. She aimed high and she sought compelling content in her work - but with Mitchell we don't get the conflation of the self with the sublime or the transcendent, that sense of overweening (and so often male) singularity. I wouldn't be surprised if spending the bulk of her working life in France didn't enforce a little esthetic humility.

Abstract Expressionism didn't reinvent painting, it reconfigured it. Reconfiguration implies a past and a future subject to change. It also implies the idea of a practitioner, an effecter of that change from within. Mitchell was the practitioner par excellence. This beautiful exhibition, thoughtfully and boldly organized by independent curator Livingston with the assistance of the Whitney's assistant curator for special projects Yvette Y. Lee ,should give Mitchell her due. While it grounds the artist in her time, the show loosens the paintings from the grip of art history and its preoccupation with matters of precedence and influence, its relentless contextualizing. The paintings, which Livingston presents unbolstered by works on paper or documentary materials, are emphatically there. Subject matter may have grabbed the spotlight these days, but if this retrospective is any indication, the question of content has been asked and answered. Abstract painting can still speak to us, even if its language is, perforce,

indirect. These paintings address us with strength and conviction, and they make the best argument of all that Joan Mitchell must be ranked as one of the finest painters of the second half of the 20th century.

1. Quoted in Tucker, Marcia, *Joan Mitchell*. (exhibition catalogue) New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1974, p 8.

2. In a recent exhibition catalog, Mitchell's old friend, the poet, Hal Fondren, recalls in that in the mid '50s Mitchell firmly rejected Second Generation status. "Joan would have none of this. Her line was that the movement had only begun around 1950 and that she was in on the start." From "Sunday Afternoons with Joan." In *Joan Mitchell: Paintings 1950 to 1955*, New York, Robert Miller Gallery, 1998.

3 Sandler, Irving. "Mitchell paints a picture." *Art News* 56 (October, 1957), p.70

4 Sandler, Irving. *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. New York, Icon Editions, 1978, p. 69.

5 Livingston, Jane. *The Paintings Joan Mitchell*. (exhibition catalogue) Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2002 p. 38.

6 Greenberg, Clement. "The Later Monet," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, vol. 4, p.9.

7 Alloway, Lawrence, "Systemic Painting." The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1966. In *Topics in American Art since 1945* (New York: Norton, 1975) pp. 80, 84.

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