

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Joan Mitchell (1926 - 1992)

Untitled

Pastel on paper, laid down.
Signed Joan Mitchell at the lower right.
781 x 582 mm. (30 3/4 x 22 7/8 in.)

Drawn in 1979, this large and vibrant composition was probably made in a studio that Joan Mitchell kept in Montparnasse in Paris in the late 1970's, and which she used for making drawings, in particular pastels. Only a handful of close friends were allowed access to the studio. The opposite in many ways of her large studio in Vétheuil, the Montparnasse studio was equipped with tables and small easels, and she worked there in relative solitude, sometimes sleeping there. This was a period, shortly after her separation from the painter Jean-Paul Riopelle, when she found herself unwilling or unable to work on large canvases, and began instead to focus on works on paper.

As Jane Livingston has written, 'Mitchell's work on paper was something she separated entirely from her painting activity and an endeavor about which she apparently had mixed feelings. She would say that her pastels were "lady paintings". She did not want to be called a lady painter unless she was using the term herself, nor did she truly invest her deepest energies or intellect in these drawings... Mitchell worked at varying scales at the Montparnasse studio, always on paper, but preferred to show her oversize pastels rather than the small ones... Although making drawings probably never rivaled printmaking in her own priorities, her place in Montparnasse gave her respite, and a way of continuing to work that seems to have been cyclically therapeutic. Ironically, her activity in this studio was literally toxic to her; she worked in a badly ventilated space, using powdery substances, including cadmium, which certainly exacerbated the lung problems that became more and more debilitating.'

A retrospective exhibition devoted to Mitchell's work in pastel, comprising some forty works, was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1992. In the catalogue of that exhibition, Klaus Kertess wrote of the artist's pastels that 'They have an elemental directness as well as a sensuous, chromatic braveness not customarily associated with the pastel's paler and politer proclivities. They are at once vulnerable

and defiant. Mitchell has fully exploited the fragile powdery effusiveness of pastel – the way it fugitively settles into and illuminates the nap of the paper surface. Pastel’s willing responsiveness to the varying pressures of the hand has been deployed in a startling panoply of mark making, from blurred staccato tracks, to amorphous wisps, to sinuous trajectories of athletic aggressiveness. These pastels have a kind of velvet fury.’

Similarly, in a review of the Whitney exhibition, one critic noted that of Mitchell’s pastels that ‘Essential to all of her work is the attention she gives to the physical weight of pigment. The pastel is applied in thick, emphatic strokes here, tangles of loose calligraphic thread there, with a judicious use of rubbing, smudging and overdrawing throughout. The interwoven colors are many and rich, with a bias toward vegetable hues - succulent greens, dark reds - that make a few of these drawings look like informal but exotic bouquets.’

Provenance:

Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris
Acquired from them by Marcel Brient, Paris, until 2012.

Artist description:

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