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:

One of the foremost American Abstract Expressionist painters, Joan Mitchell produced a superb body of oil paintings, pastels and prints between the 1950s and the 1980s. Trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which she graduated in 1947, Mitchell spent time living and working for brief periods in Mexico, Paris and the south of France before settling in New York. 1950 marks the true start of her career as a painter, with the early influence of artists such as Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky and Franz Kline visible in her work. She became a habitué of the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village, a popular meeting place for avant-garde artists and writers, and was friendly with such painters as de Kooning, Kline, Phillip Guston, Grace Hartigan and Helen Frankenthaler, as well as the poets Frank O'Hara and John Ashberry. In 1951 Mitchell took part in the seminal Ninth Street Show, organized by the artist's group known as 'The Club' and the art dealer Leo Castelli. She had her first solo exhibition at Eugene Thaw's New Gallery in New York in 1952, which was a critical if not commercial success, and the same year moved into a studio on St. Mark's Place that she would keep until the early 1980s, even when living and working abroad.

Although Mitchell had a series of seven solo exhibitions at the Stable Gallery in New York between 1953 and 1965, by 1955 she had also begun to divide her time between New York and Paris. There she met and fell in love with the French-Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle, with whom she would have a long and often fractious relationship. Her work began to be included in group shows and museum exhibitions, notably at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1957, the Venice Biennale in 1958, Documenta II in Kassel in 1959 and the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1961. By this time her paintings had been acquired for the collections of both the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as the Art Institute of Chicago. After 1959 Mitchell painted almost all of her work in France, and she was to spend the last thirty-five years of her career there. She had her first solo gallery show in Paris in 1962, and soon afterwards gained the support of the French dealer Jean Fournier, at whose eponymous Parisian gallery she was to exhibit between 1967 and her death in 1992.

When Mitchell's mother died in 1966 she inherited part of a family trust, and the following year purchased a large house, 'La Tour', at Vétheuil, a town on the banks of the Seine, about sixty kilometres northwest of Paris, where the Impressionist painter Claude Monet had lived and worked between 1878 and 1881. Mitchell and Riopelle lived there together, and she had a separate large studio behind the house. The size of the studio enabled her to work on a grander scale than before, and the first works she produced there reflected, as has been noted, 'the artist's determination to allow her new, bucolic environment at Vétheuil to take her in new directions. Her move from Paris to the quiet and always beautiful two-acre property overlooking the Seine afforded her a new privacy and a physical connection

with the landscape.' The paintings Mitchell produced at Vétheuil have a more expansive approach - perhaps partly inspired by the changing landscape, with a broad view of the Seine river, that she could see from the windows of her new home – than the works she had produced in her Paris studio. She was also able to create works in a diptych or triptych format, and sometimes even larger, four-panel compositions, characterized by bright colours and bold, energetic brushstrokes. The first major retrospective of Mitchell's paintings took place in 1974 at the Whitney Museum. Two years later she began to be represented in America by Xavier Fourcade, who showed her work at his Upper East Side gallery in New York until his death in 1987.

In 1979 Mitchell and Riopelle separated, and for some time thereafter she found herself unable to work on large canvases. She took a small studio in Montparnasse in Paris, and there began to work on a series of pastel drawings. As the scholar Jane Livingston has written of these small-scale works, '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…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.'

With the loyal support of her dealers Jean Fournier in Paris and Xavier Fourcade in New York, Mitchell's work was acquired by a network of private collectors in America and Europe. Soon after returning to large-scale painting around 1980, the artist had her first European museum exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The early 1980s found her creating some of her finest works, notably the Grande Vallée series of twenty-one lyrical canvases painted during the period of just over a year, between 1983 and 1984. She also began producing a series of colour lithographs at the Tyler Graphics studio in upstate New York. Health issues and a cancer diagnosis, however, meant that there were long periods when the artist was unable to work as much as before. Another major retrospective exhibition travelled throughout the United States in 1988-1989 and Mitchell continued working on paintings and prints until the very end of her life. She died, of advanced lung cancer, in October 1992, at the age of sixty-six.