

Joan MITCHELL (Chicago 1925 - Paris 1992)

Close

Pastel and typewriter ink on paper; a page from a sketchbook.

Signed Joan Mitchell at the lower right.

A poem by J. J. Mitchell typewritten along the left edge of the sheet:

Close

To

fit

a

word

in

this

small

space

may

fill

a

void

I

need

to

trace

but

hat

to

say

when

I

embrace

a

longer

line

I

choke

on

space.

Signed by the poet J. J. Mitchell at the lower left.

353 x 235 mm. (13 7/8 x 9 1/4 in.)

Joan Mitchell once stated that ‘Music, poems, landscape, and dogs make me want to paint...And painting is what allows me to survive.’ The artist had a deep and abiding love of English and French literature and, in particular, poetry. She had grown up in a literary household in Chicago and was close friends with a number of writers and poets, including John Ashbery, Samuel Beckett, Jacques Dupin, Frank O’Hara, Nathan Kernan, Pierre Schneider and James Schuyler. Her work was often directly inspired by poetry, and indeed she once described her painting as ‘more like a poem’. As she added, in a 1957 interview, ‘My art embodies the qualities that differentiate a line of poetry from a line of prose.’ As has been noted by one scholar, ‘For Mitchell, poetry was a call across water, a model for hailing one another. It gave her a form in which to feel the world.’

Drawn in 1975, this is one of Joan Mitchell's 'poem pastels'; a series of unique abstract pastel compositions incorporating typewritten free-verse poems by five of the artist's friends - James Schuyler, Jacques Dupin, J. J. Mitchell, Chris Larson and Pierre Schneider. The present sheet incorporates the poem Close by the poet J. J. Mitchell (1940-1986), a close friend of Frank O'Hara, who stayed with the artist at Vétheuil from the summer of 1974 to the end of 1975.

Another example of Joan Mitchell's and J. J. Mitchell's 'poem pastels' from this 1975 series, entitled Blue, is today in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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.