THE NEW YORKER

THE ART WORLD

# TOUGH LOVE

*Resurrecting Joan Mitchell.*

by Peter Schjeldahl

JULY 15, 2002

At a boozy dinner party that I attended in a New York walkup nearly thirty years ago, a woman announced that she was getting married. Joan Mitchell, who was there, exploded. How could anyone even think of doing something so bourgeois? The buzzer sounded. It was Mitchell's longtime lover, the French-Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle. He wanted to speak to her, but he wouldn't come upstairs. From the landing, she told him in scorching terms to leave her alone. Back at the table, she resumed denouncing the insidiousness of marriage as a trap for free souls. The buzzer again. Another cascade of profanity down the stairwell. I was awed. Here was craziness of a scary and rare order. Those who knew Joan Mitchell pass these kinds of stories around like sacred-monster trading cards. But Mitchell's personality was one thing, and her art is entirely another. They share only the energy of a towering original who, ten years after her death, in France, where she lived near Monet's gardens at Giverny, has yet to receive her due.

"The Paintings of Joan Mitchell," at the Whitney, should remedy that. This dense, dazzling retrospective of works spanning her career, from 1951 to 1992, confirms that Mitchell was not just the best of the so-called second-generation Abstract Expressionists—a status already hers by common consent—but a great modern artist who started strong and improved with age. Her work at the Whitney makes it hard to imagine why anyone would want to paint other than abstractly, revelling in the liberty and purity of oils wielded with articulate passion. Mitchell seems to me the best argument for redressing the long-standing bias against contemporary expressionist painting that was mandated by Clement Greenberg in his promotion of mannerly colorfield abstraction. (According to Mitchell, she was "kicked out" of a gallery owned by Lawrence Rubin after Greenberg told the dealer, "Get rid of that gestural horror.")

Mitchell was born in 1926 to a wealthy family in Chicago. She was lavishly educated in literature and art by her mother, Marion Strobel, the co-editor, with Harriet Monroe, of the leading American magazine of modern verse, *Poetry*, and at a private school that she later described as "progressive, not conventional, full of Jews." (I quote from the introduction to the Whitney catalogue, by the show's curator, Jane Livingston.) Her maternal grandfather, a bridge engineer, imparted a love of structural design. Her father, a dermatologist and an amateur artist, pushed her to excel in all things. As a teen-ager, she became a championship figure skater, as well as a diver and a tennis player. She said that she chose a painting career to escape her father's control. (In psychoanalysis for much of her life, she surely plumbed that subject.) She was a natural—witness the chromatic inventiveness of several landscape gouaches that she

painted in art school.

In 1949, she married her former schoolmate Barney Rosset, whose eventful ownership of Grove Press began in 1951. Their intense union ended in divorce a year later. In New York, she made a point of befriending Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Franz Kline. Another ally was the poet Frank O'Hara. She held her own in the hard-living downtown scene. This wasn't easy for a woman painter who—unlike Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and Elaine de Kooning—was not the mate of an alpha male. She kept an apartment on St. Marks Place but lived mainly in France, where her work was always well regarded. Indeed, she might be seen as the last great foreign-born French painter, invigorating Parisian painterly sensuousness with American nerviness and New York School rigor.

One stayed alert around Mitchell. I recall her raffish and severe presence: a long, handsome face framed by huge eyeglasses and a straight mop of dark hair, wreathed in cigarette smoke. A wry set to her mouth would portend the utterance of something startlingly smart and, as often as not, scathing. But when she painted she sang, almost despite herself. Several works from the sixties, which she termed "very violent and angry paintings," are among the most subtly lyrical of her career. In the catalogue of a companion Mitchell show at the Edward Tyler Nahem gallery, the curator and critic Richard Francis aptly quotes Andrew Marvell: "Annihilating all that's made / To a green thought in a green shade."

The earliest work at the Whitney is the precocious, ten-foot-long "Cross Section of a Bridge" (1951), whose wittily bashed-up Cubism recalls both Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" and works by de Kooning from the late nineteen-forties. In the next painting, from the same year, that style melts like tallow, signalling the influence of Mitchell's most significant forebear, Arshile Gorky. Unlike peers who aped the styles of de Kooning or Pollock, Mitchell absorbed Gorky's earlier modulation of Picasso and Surrealism into a formal language of counterposed line and color and thick and thin textures. Gorky understood that emotional eloquence is an effect not of theatrical gestures but of varied contrasts and rhythms, in which surprising disjunctions join in a harmonious whole. For Gorky's insinuating linear figures, Mitchell substituted the shapes of strokes made with brushes of different sizes. At times, every mark seems to have its own personality.

The success of the drips and runs in Mitchell's pictures, which she painted on upright canvases, suggests preternatural luck. There isn't a wrong note in her cadenzas—only a swarm of piquant, fugitive grace notes falling like loose change. Every element has a rising, hovering, or sagging weight, achieved by her finesse with relative densities and by a supreme sense of color. ("She could make yellow heavy," Brice Marden has remarked.) A resistance to repeating herself produced no signature motif but an impression of musical variations on a silent theme.

Like Monet, Mitchell used colors redolent of nature and juxtaposed them to mingle in the eye, though not to create illusions of atmospheric light. Like the greatest Monets—the Rouen Cathedrals and some of the Giverny near-abstractions—her best paintings amount to metaphysical conundrums: you don't know what you're looking at. It's paint, of course, but as a medium of contradictory connotations. One thickly worked triptych, "Wet Orange" (1971-72), struck me, to my happy bewilderment, as both all wall and all window. Mitchell also had something of Monet's spookily disinterested professionalism. Straight from the shoulder, she employed her talent and troubled fury as if they were nothing but tools.

In the Whitney catalogue, the art historian Linda Nochlin quotes Elaine de Kooning: "I was talking to Joan Mitchell at a party ten years ago when a man came up to us and said, 'What do you women artists think . . .' Joan grabbed my arm and said, 'Elaine, let's get the hell out of here.' " The mission of Mitchell's animus was to get her out of situations that threatened her freedom. The situations generally involved fatherly importunity or condescension. The personal wasn't political—she was leery of all solidarities, including the feminist one—but, rather, a daily battle that had desperately high stakes. Her orneriness was the palace guard of her lyricism. ♦