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THE TROUBLE WITH JOAN MITCHELL

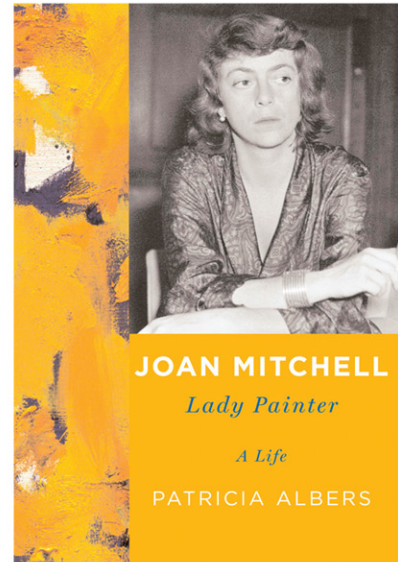
BY FAYE HIRSCH

Critic Irving Sandler's publication of "Mitchell Paints a Picture" in *ArtNews* in 1957 meant that the 32-year-old Joan Mitchell had arrived. His article, which is extensively mined in the prologue of Patricia Albers's new biography of Mitchell, elevates the book's opening pages, vividly conveying the artist's careful balancing of premeditation and spontaneity.

But overall the book, the first biography of Mitchell (1925-1992)—something of an antihero, or at least a subject heroic in unexpected ways—turns out to be a mixed bag, despite its irresistibly juicy material. Mitchell's splendid paintings, daunting intellect, friend-

ships with many preeminent artists and writers, and mind-bogglingly self-destructive behavior are legendary. Albers, a California-based art journalist and curator who wrote a 2002 biography of Tina Modotti, spent nearly 10 years combing through archives public and private and conducting hundreds of interviews with Mitchell's contemporaries. The author faced a challenging task in processing and reconciling (or not) the many riveting anecdotes about her famously prickly subject. Mitchell's letters, always literate and often moving, are frequently quoted to great effect. (One hopes they will someday be published on their own.) Yet, for all its weight, the book sometimes feels slapdash: glutted with narrative detail, it gives an uneasy sense of chumminess and only limited insight into Mitchell's artistic legacy.

"Lady painter" is a sobriquet that Mitchell applied to herself, ruefully and ironically, on numerous occasions. Here she is, for example, speaking to a group of people during the installation at the



Joan Mitchell, Lady Painter:
A Life, by Patricia Albers,
New York, Alfred A. Knopf,
2011; 515 pages, \$40 cloth,
\$19.99 e-book.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art of her 1988 traveling career retrospective:

[Mitchell's] tone abruptly shifted to sarcasm: "Not bad for a lady painter." A brisk toss of her hair. "I think everything is magnificent." Then, as a mock aside: "I'm trying to act like a male painter. You know, where you say everything you do is wonderful."

Albers traces the self-deprecation in the phrase back to the pressures of Mitchell's childhood. The painter's father, James Herbert ("Jimmie") Mitchell, was a self-made Chicago dermatologist, hobbyist-artist and heavy drinker. In 1922 he married Marion Strobel, a poet and debutante 14 years his junior, the

Joan Mitchell in the Paris studio she borrowed from sculptor Day Schnabel, 1957. *Life* magazine photo by Loomis Dean, courtesy Joyce Pensato.

daughter of a wealthy civic engineer. Jimmie often told Joan he wished she had been a boy, though she delivered on every other count. A formidable athlete—a fact that makes the horrible physical decline of her later years all the more painful to read about—she was a teenage figure skater who placed nationally, a brainy and creative student at the alternative Francis W. Parker School in Chicago, and, from her earliest days, a gifted artist. Pressured by her father when she was just 12 to decide what she wanted to do with her life, she settled on painting. The Mitchells regularly took Joan and her sister Sally (b. 1923) to the Art Institute, where Joan formed a lifelong attachment to the works of the Post-Impressionists, particularly van Gogh. (She earned her BFA and MFA at the School of the Art Institute.)

Her mother was rich, and Mitchell grew up rich. Yet as a young woman in New York, she donned worn-out clothes (which in the book's marvelous photographs make an already attractive, though not conventionally beautiful, woman look even sexier) and tried with limited success to keep her wealth a secret from her Abstract Expressionist peers. In spirit at least, she held fast to the romantic ideal of the penniless bohemian.

Mitchell may have scorned her mother's gentility, but she benefitted from the poet's intellectual self-confidence. Marion Strobel (as she was known professionally) served two stints as a staffer at *Poetry* magazine and was involved in the celebrated journal's operations and financial backing for 46 years. The Mitchells entertained well-known literary figures at home, with readings by the likes of George Dillon, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Carl Sandburg and Louise Bogan. The painter had a famous ease with writers and an impressive command of poetry in particular, which she could recite by heart.

When she was 21, Mitchell fell in love with her Parker high school friend Barney Rosset, marrying him in 1949 and divorcing him in 1952. (The two remained friends for many years; Mitchell broke with him only toward the end of her life.) It was partly at her urging that, in 1951, Rosset purchased the literary imprint Grove Press, which he soon made great. Mitchell suggested he begin by reissuing Henry James's then out-of-print novel *The Golden Bowl*. Rosset did, then went on to publish some of the most controversial avant-garde writers of the age,

including Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Henry Miller and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Mitchell grew especially close to Frank O'Hara and Beckett (with whom she had an affair), and was friends with Barbara Guest, James Schuyler and Allen Ginsberg, among many other poets.

ROSSET AND MITCHELL moved to New York in 1949, and the book comes alive as Albers immerses us in their scene—arguments at the Club (where Mitchell was one of the few female members), carousing at the Cedar Bar, baseball games in the Hamptons. Mitchell may have been labeled later a “second-generation Abstract Expressionist,” but in fact “the generations” freely mingled, as is evident from the rosters of group shows and parties. She was pals with the

career. Yet we get little sense of how her paintings compare to those of others, let alone of her own stylistic evolution.

However aggressively her father may have pushed her in youth, Mitchell clearly embraced the habits of hard work. Throughout her career, she maintained an exceptionally high degree of artistic self-discipline, even in the midst of enormous (mostly self-wrought) personal travail. That would prove to be her true heroism. Of course, she also inherited in spades her father's penchant for alcohol. Mitchell's prodigious drinking habits (and heavy smoking) began before she arrived in New York, and she soon bettered many of the Cedar Bar champions. Alfred Leslie put it bluntly: Mitchell “had a liver like a shopping bag.” For her



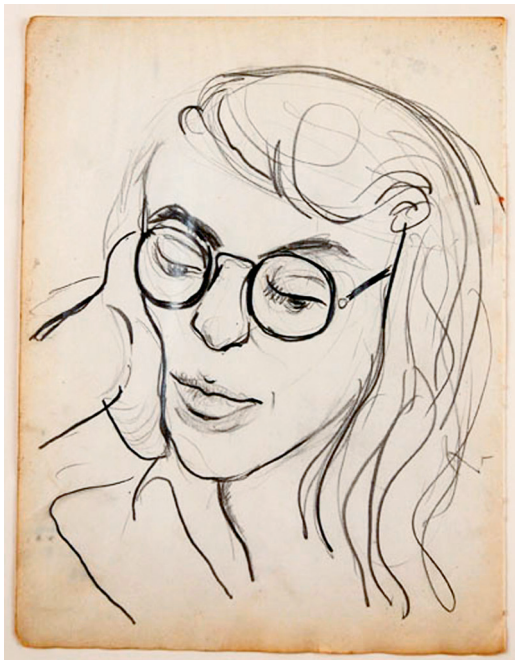
Above, Mitchell with Barney Rosset, under the Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1948. Collection Sally Perry.

Opposite, graphite-on-paper self-portrait from Mitchell's art school years, ca. 1944. Courtesy Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, New York.

male artists but cool toward the women (Grace Hartigan and Helen Frankenthaler in particular; Elaine de Kooning was a close friend). Arriving in New York, Mitchell was wowed by the paintings of Willem de Kooning and sought him out, knocking instead on Franz Kline's door. She became fast friends with both men. Mitchell's fun-loving side is amply demonstrated; in addition, she could be financially generous to friends in need, especially younger artists.

But what, precisely, was the effect of all these connections on Mitchell's art? Albers provides many lush descriptions of works from key points in the artist's

whole life, we learn, she was an open drinker but a secretive—and repeatedly unsuccessful—quitter. Moreover, she enjoyed, given the times and her gender, an astonishing sexual freedom—which Albers, to her credit, never characterizes as promiscuity. The author is clearly intent on treating her subject the same way posterity has treated Mitchell's equally profligate male peers. Mitchell



slept with lots of men—for love, revenge or a lark—but rarely, it seems, for ambition. The stories of her youthful libertinism can be hair-raising, involving physical violence and a very ugly disregard for other women, but they also inspire a weird awe. This was, after all, long before the sexual liberation of the 1960s.

Two men were to have a profound effect on Mitchell. One was the painter Michael Goldberg (1924-2007), the main reason for Mitchell's divorce from Rosset, and her partner in an *amour fou* of the early '50s. Albers provides a vivid portrait of the erratic Goldberg, who in her account was jailed several times and twice remanded to mental institutions. He stole from friends, forging a check under the all-suffering Rosset's name in 1951 and, in the mid-'60s, filching several drawings from de Kooning and faking his signature. One reason Mitchell began spending so much time in France in the mid-'50s was to free herself from her obsession with Goldberg and their inebriated, knock-down-drag-out fights.

Yet in Paris, in 1955, she met the Canadian-born painter Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923-2002), an art star with whom she began a possibly even crazier relationship that lasted, nevertheless, 24 years. Riopelle was married when they met and divorced his wife to lure Mitchell to France for good; although she longed for it and he promised, he never married her.

For a time, Mitchell subsumed her own ambitions to those of the inveterate womanizer Riopelle. His was a glamorous life,

filled with yachts, expensive cars and multiple dwellings. Mitchell grew close to his two daughters but never had a child of her own, a fact she often lamented to friends. Riopelle wanted no more, and certainly not with Mitchell.

She traveled in heady circles in Paris and, as in New York, socialized constantly. For all her misanthropy, Mitchell craved human contact (though she probably loved dogs as a species more than people). Among her Paris chums were the U.S. expatriate artists Sam Francis (with whom she was lovers for a time), Norman Bluhm and Shirley Jaffe (from then on one of her closest friends). Others included European artists Bram van Velde and Alberto Giacometti, and writers Beckett and Harry Mathews (and many more).

In 1968, Mitchell purchased a rural retreat called La Tour in Vétheuil, near Giverny. She bought the property with her inheritance; Riopelle paid for renovations. In her later years, La Tour became something of a pilgrimage for young artists, whom Mitchell would take under her wing, for better or worse. Mitchell and Riopelle split up in 1979, after he began a relationship with one of Mitchell's young followers, a betrayal that Mitchell never forgave.

Mitchell's terrifying physical deterioration began in 1984, when she developed cancer of the jaw. Although she conquered the disease for a time, she was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 1990, the same year she underwent unsuccessful hip surgery. It was an excruciating decline, her body failing her in numerous ways, and she died of lung cancer in 1992 at the Curie Institute in Paris.

Albers's narrative is densely packed with friends and lovers in succession, whirlwind travels and numerous exhibitions. Regrettably, and somewhat maddeningly, the editors have allowed her to go on for pages without supplying dates; she jumps around chronologically, and "come December," "that spring" or "seven weeks earlier" do not suffice to position the frustrated reader. Thus it is a challenge to pinpoint dates of shows, or when, exactly, Mitchell began or ended arrangements with her various illustrious dealers (among them Eleanor Ward of Stable Gallery, Martha Jackson and Xavier Fourcade in New York, and

Jean Fournier in Paris, the last a solid, decades-long association). Mitchell's first solo museum show was in 1972, the year she turned 47, at the Everson Museum in Syracuse. She was given a midcareer retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum in 1974, but, surprisingly, the traveling career survey organized by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University in 1988 had no New York leg.

Albers is bent on making a big case for Mitchell's apparent synesthesia, the rare faculty, or condition, some people have of blending sense data—smells experienced as colors, color as sounds, etc. However, it's not entirely clear what the claim, which the author returns to repeatedly, is meant to explain, beyond the artist's hyper-sensitivity. Albers speculates toward the end of the book that Mitchell's lifelong feeling of alienation might have been lightened had

MITCHELL'S SPLENDID WORKS, DAUNTING INTELLECT, FRIENDSHIPS WITH MANY PREEMINENT ARTISTS AND WRITERS, AND MIND-BOGGLINGLY SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR ARE LEGENDARY.

the condition been diagnosed and had she found others of her kind. This assessment seems laughable, given the effects that Mitchell's habitual drinking had on her and the people around her.

Albers herself cautions against giving the synesthesia too much importance: "To reduce her to a case is to disregard her painterly intelligence, her professionalism, her years of training and work." Indeed. Mitchell's great struggles, her perseverance, her inspiration from many loyal friends, her love of music and poetry—these are the factors, amply demonstrated, that conspired to make her the artist she was.

Of course, there remains a certain mystery. How could someone this ornery attract people who loved her so deeply, and how, against the odds of an art world that to this day refuses to rate her achievements on a par with those of her male colleagues, did she manage to carry on? Albers's biography helps us to understand the sheer charisma of Mitchell, but we still need a serious study of the work and its legacy—perhaps not the task of a biographer, after all. ○