

# CHEIM & READ



## artistdossier



Joan Mitchell

ALTHOUGH THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST CROWD of 1950s New York was infamously macho, the formidable Joan Mitchell always held her own, inside and outside the studio. Today, with a record of €5.2 million (\$7 million)—the second-highest price achieved by a female artist at auction—set last year at Christie's Paris for an untitled 1971 canvas, Mitchell is beginning to catch up to some of her male peers in market performance.

Born in 1925 to a wealthy Chicago family—her maternal grandfather, Charles Stroebel, was the structural engineer for many of Chicago's bridges—and classically trained at the Art Institute of Chicago, Mitchell moved to New York in 1947. Her painting predilections quickly shifted toward abstraction after she saw Arshile Gorky's calligraphic Surrealism and Jackson Pollock's heroically scaled arabesques. Determined to be part of this heady new art scene, Mitchell established her studio at its epicenter, on West Ninth Street, and soon befriended Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston and Franz Kline, among other members of the hard-living New York School. She increased the size of her paintings and experimented with muscular, gestural brushwork.

Mitchell exhibited alongside her contemporaries in the seminal Ninth Street Show, curated by the dealer Leo Castelli in 1951, and was given solo

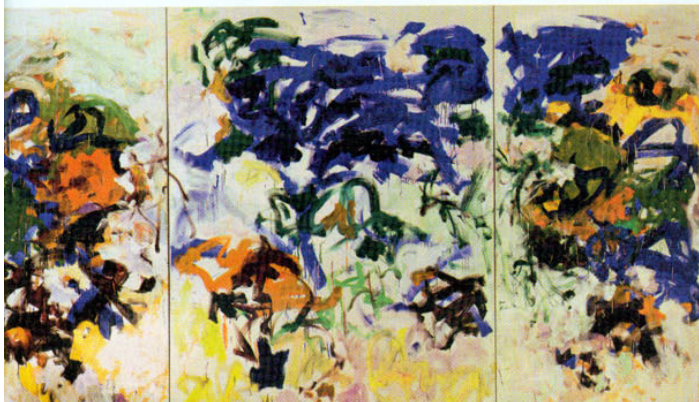
**The abstract artist left her New York School peers in 1959 for France. But the caliber of her work didn't diminish—as her unstoppable market today reflects. By Hilarie M. Sheets**

85

shows at New York's highly regarded New and Stable galleries throughout the 1950s. Although always maintaining a Manhattan studio, she lived primarily in France starting in 1959, eventually settling in rural Vétheuil, north of Paris, on an expansive property she bought with the share of the Stroebel trust she inherited from her mother in 1967. Residing in the countryside inspired a more lyrical approach to abstraction, filled with evocations of sunlight and shimmering water in a palette rich in yellows, blues, greens and violets. She vacillated between dense, thickly painted compositions covering the entire surface—characteristic of her work from the 1950s and her '80s "Grande Vallée" series—and more centripetal compositions suspended on open canvases, exemplified by her somber-hued pieces from the early 1960s and brilliantly colored paintings of the late '60s and '70s.

Perhaps because she'd moved away from the hub of the art world or because she was a woman, or perhaps for both reasons, Mitchell, who died in 1992, didn't make it into the pantheon inhabited by de Kooning, Gorky, Kline, Pollock and Rothko, whose prices regularly reach into the tens of millions. She emerged from the margins, however, with the 2002 traveling retrospective of her work mounted by New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. "Historically, there was always some reluctance to put her in the first rank of Abstract

Two of Joan Mitchell's abstractions, painted decades apart, hit the block this past May. *Untitled*, 1961–62, top, fetched \$5.1 million at Sotheby's. At left: *Bracket*, 1989, earned \$4.7 million at Christie's.



FROM TOP: SOTHEBY'S; CHRISTIE'S



Expressionists," says Robert Manley, the head of Christie's postwar and contemporary department in New York, "but the Whitney retrospective started to change everyone's perception about Joan Mitchell. Increasingly people are recognizing that she is as great an American artist as the 1950s produced."

John Cheim, the director of New York's Cheim & Read gallery, the exclusive agent for the sale and promotion of work in the Joan Mitchell Foundation Collection, agrees. "Joan is no more a second-generation Abstract Expressionist," he says, referring to the term often applied to Mitchell and such colleagues as Sam Francis, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner and Jack Tworkov, "than Kline or Guston, both of whom were making figurative paintings until the late 1940s. She was just younger and a woman. She is the definition of the Abstract Expressionist and one of the great colorists, along with de Kooning and Rothko."

The reassessment of Mitchell's work prompted by the 2002 show has boosted her prices. As an illustration, Manley points to a 1969 canvas from her "Sunflowers" series, whose radiant bursts of yellow were influenced by her proximity to nature in Vétheuil. The picture sold at Sotheby's in 2000 for \$280,000. When it came up again, at Christie's in 2006, it brought just over \$2 million. "Her market has improved since then," says Manley. "I think now it's more of a \$3 million-to-\$4 million painting." From October 23 through December 20, the canvas will be on loan at Cheim & Read for an exhibition devoted to Mitchell's paintings, pastels and etchings inspired by sunflowers and executed from the 1960s until her death. The paintings range in price from \$2 million to \$6 million, the works on paper from \$100,000 to \$300,000.

Mitchell's market is also helped by the relative inaccessibility of works by her more celebrated counterparts. "As Pollock paintings start selling for \$100 million-plus and you can't get them, people begin giving another look to

other Abstract Expressionists, who were somewhat underappreciated. She's part of that groundswell of artists whose world records have been set in the past five years," says Manley. He includes Francis, Krasner and Robert Motherwell in that group.

The untitled 1971 canvas that brought Mitchell's record of \$7 million is painted in a rectilinear style, in which she applied bold slabs of color in figure-ground tension with pale, dappled fields—an approach she experimented with in the 1970s. Works from this period, including *Salut Sally*, 1970, which sold at Artcurial, in Paris, in 2006 for €2.6 million (\$3.3 million), show the clear influence of the painter and legendary teacher Hans Hofmann, whom Mitchell admired yet found terrifying in the one class of his she attended, in 1947 in New York.

Anthony Grant, Sotheby's senior international specialist for contemporary art, says he is not surprised that it was in France that both these 1970s paintings brought such high prices.

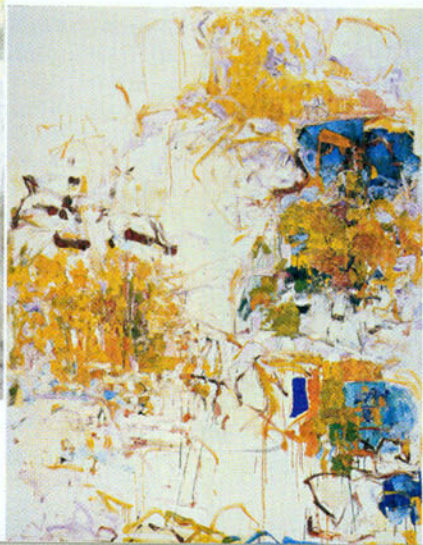
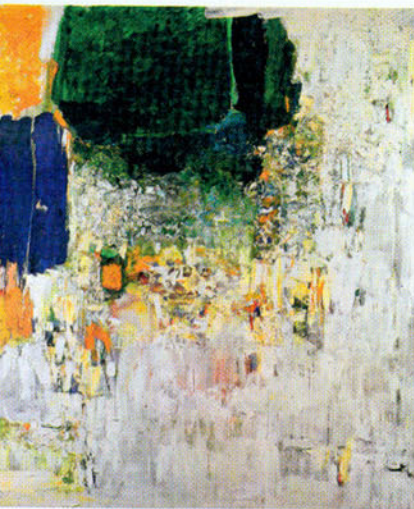
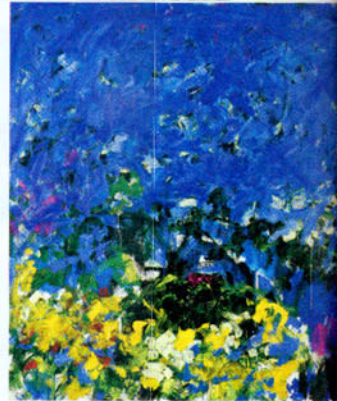


Mitchell's body of work from the 1970s, he notes, had never been widely popular and was undervalued until the Whitney retrospective confirmed its validity, but the French were more familiar with these pictures, which had been shown mostly by Mitchell's Paris dealer, Jean Fournier. However, a prejudice against the period may still exist on this side of the Atlantic: When *Salut Sally* was offered again, at Sotheby's New York this past May, with an estimate of \$5 million to \$7 million, it failed to find a buyer.

Although a 1970s painting holds her auction record, Mitchell's work from the late 1950s is probably the most sought after, because of its alignment with Abstract Expressionism. Why, then, hasn't one of these nabbed her top price? "I think a truly great >>

#### From the Files

- An untitled painting from 1961-62 featuring a violent, primordial dark cloud hovering on a pale ground, typical of Mitchell's 1960s canvases, sold at Sotheby's New York in May 2008 for \$5.1 million.
- The artist's great loves were Cézanne, Matisse and van Gogh; she became more inspired by the Impressionists—as evidenced by her luminous 1986 diptych *River II*, which sold for \$2.4 million at Christie's New York in 2007—after she moved to Vétheuil, near where Monet had lived.
- Even while struggling with cancer and alcoholism in the last decade of her life, Mitchell produced joyous, athletic paintings full of light and air, such as *Bracket*, 1989, which fetched \$4.7 million at Christie's New York in May 2008.
- In 2007, Mitchell's first solo show in the U.K., at Hauser & Wirth, attracted more than 4,500 visitors. It opened five days before the 1971 *Untitled* brought her auction record of €5.2 million (\$7 million) at Christie's Paris on May 30.



86  
Clockwise from top: Mitchell in 1961; *La Grande Vallée*, 1983, sold for \$3.8 million at Christie's New York in May; *La Grande Vallée XI*, 1984, earned \$5 million in February at Sotheby's London; a "Sunflower" work that fetched \$2 million in May 2006 at Christie's New York; Mitchell's record holder, *Untitled*, 1971, which sold for \$7 million at Christie's Paris in May 2007.



1950s paintings could start approaching \$10 million. There just hasn't been one," says Manley, citing the 1996 sale at Christie's of *The Harbor Master*, 1957, for \$464,500 as the last time a spectacular painting by Mitchell from this period came up at auction. In 2007, the Art Institute of Chicago sold *Ste. Hilaire*, 1957, at Christie's New York for \$3.8 million. Manley notes that this canvas was somewhat atypical for the period, airier, with sparser brushwork, and feels that her signature scaffolded compositions bleeding out to the edges—such as *Evenings on Seventy-third Street*, 1956–57, which the collector Bunny Adler loaned to the Whitney retrospective—would bring higher prices.

The 1950s is not the only period in vogue, however. Collectors also bid up works from the last decade of Mitchell's life, as they do late works by de Kooning and Guston. "Mitchell is one of these artists who had incredible outbursts later in life [producing pieces] that people consider among her best," says Manley, citing her "Grande Vallée" series, with its evocation of lush forested landscapes. *La Grande Vallée XI*, 1984, sold at Sotheby's London this year for £2.6 million (\$5 million), and *La Grande Vallée*, 1983, brought \$3.8 million at Christie's New York in May 2008. "With Mitchell I think there has been a reevaluation of the late hand of a genius," says Grant, attributing this to the Whitney retrospective. "There was always interest in her earlier aspect and now in the later aspect, and they almost compete with each other in terms of price level." Manley concurs: "The thing about Mitchell is the best works come throughout her career. One can develop a market when you've got an artist who's so consistently good."

Although American collectors, including Betty and Richard Hedreen, Samuel J. Heyman, and Alice and Thomas Tisch, continue to constitute Mitchell's strongest base of support, the artist is gaining exposure among Europeans beyond France. Nils Ohlsen, the curatorial director of the Kunsthalle Emden, is organizing Mitchell's first museum exhibition in Germany. Including some 35 canvases from throughout her career, it will run from December 6 through March 8, 2009, after which it will travel to Palazzo Magnani, in Reggio Emilia, Italy. "A lot of people are curious about her in Germany. Everyone knows Pollock and de Kooning, but I think the female part of the Abstract Expressionists is little known in Europe," says Ohlsen, noting the exception of France, where Mitchell is in several private collections, from which he has borrowed works for the show.

Cheim & Read recently placed Mitchell paintings in public collections abroad. Among

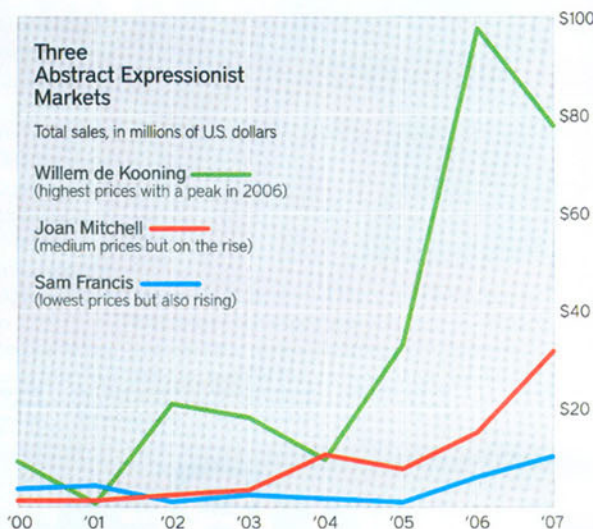
### Three Abstract Expressionist Markets

Total sales, in millions of U.S. dollars

Willem de Kooning  
(highest prices with a peak in 2006)

Joan Mitchell  
(medium prices but on the rise)

Sam Francis  
(lowest prices but also rising)



the buyers were the Louis Vuitton Foundation, for its forthcoming museum in Paris, and the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, in Korea. Last year the dealer collaborated with Hauser & Wirth, in London, to mount "Joan Mitchell: Leaving America," her first-ever exhibition in the U.K. Iwan Wirth confirms that the show, which featured 12 paintings from 1960–64, was a critical and commercial success with both American and European buyers, including the Zurich-based foundation of Friedrich Christian Flick, which paid about \$3 million for an untitled eight-foot-tall canvas from 1960. In this show, Wirth says, "Mitchell stood out amidst the company of Pollock, Kline and de Kooning, which of course also increased interest in her work." But alas, he adds, "like the work of most female artists, her art has been, and still is, highly undervalued." ■



From left: *Untitled*, 1956, from Cheim & Read's past inventory; *Untitled*, 1960, bought in 2007 by the Friedrich Christian Flick Foundation for about \$3 million; *Ste. Hilaire*, 1957, which sold at Christie's for \$3.8 million in 2007.





## DEPARTMENTS

## CONVERSATION WITH...

- 21 Dan Cameron talks about creating the country's biggest biennial in New Orleans. BY SARAH DOUGLAS

## THE REPORTER

- 25 The tide shifts in Palm Beach; watch auctioneers face off in Geneva; Ralph Esmerian's woes.

## DATEBOOK

- 33 What's happening this month at galleries, museums, auctions and fairs around the globe.

## IN THE STUDIO

- 42 John Chamberlain finds the perfect fit using vibrant metal scraps. BY ANNETTE GRANT

## SOUREN MELIKIAN

- 53 At the May sales in New York, buyers were more interested in big names and bragging rights than art.

## MARKETFILE

- 85 Artist Dossier: Joan Mitchell  
91 In Brief  
94 Auction Reviews  
104 Databank

# ART+ AUCTION

*Untitled*, 1969, by Joan Mitchell, the postwar American painter who is the subject of our Artist Dossier column this month. The work, from the artist's "Sunflower" series, sold for just over \$2 million at Christie's in 2006. See page 85