

CHEIM & READ

ARTFORUM

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Joan Mitchell

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The Abstract Expressionists were known for their energy, and in Joan Mitchell's last paintings—a selection dating from 1985 to 1992 were on view at Cheim & Read—that energy didn't flag; in fact, it grew ever stronger. In *River*, 1989, and *Trees*, 1990–91, for example, Mitchell's gestures are breezier, more free-spirited and responsive to nature than those in her earlier work. One can sense the sparkling flow of the water and the wind between the branches—the aliveness of nature. (An artist's late style need not be redundant, as seems to be the case, for instance, with de Kooning.) The paintings in the show were made shortly before her death in 1992, but there is nothing mournful about them; rather, they evince elation, a joie de vivre. Mitchell claimed that the blossoms in the two canvases titled *Sunflowers*, 1990–91, may be dying—she was too, from cancer—but they have not yet wilted and decayed. The blackness that mars the flowers has an intensity that matches the ecstatic intensity of the colors.

These sunflowers were a kind of homage to van Gogh, who also painted sunflowers, and whom Mitchell greatly admired. Having moved to Paris in 1956, and, in 1967, to Vétheuil, France (where she lived until her death), she was equally entranced by Monet and Cézanne—artists who, like van Gogh, took the French countryside as their subject. Indeed, Mitchell's late paintings recapitulate the history of French-countryside painting, but do so under the auspices of American Abstract Expressionism. The French painters famously focused on the immediate sensations experienced in nature; Mitchell, by contrast, focuses on feelings, employing a frenetic AbEx gesturalism and urban energy. These feelings, however, are not purely internal—they come

“from the outside, from landscape,” she once said. Thus, her canvases are at once hermetically sealed spaces of private feeling—even fantasies—and detailed descriptions of the world she perceives; they respond to what is inside herself as well as to what is outside. Mitchell's virtually mystical love of nature never blinded her; she saw the natural world with clear eyes, conscious of its darkness as well as its light. This awareness is what gives her work its power.

Like the French-countryside painters she admired, Mitchell observed natural colors closely, seizing vital moments with devotion. Her colors are like autumn leaves that have been plucked from the air before they fall away; they do not disperse. Her gestures flatten the colors like pressed leaves in memory's book, so they remain organized and structured to the end. Notwithstanding its blur of sensation, *Trees* contains a neat row of vertical forms—clearly the trees of the title—and the horizon line is intact; *Beauvais*, 1986, *Merçi*, 1992, and *Untitled*, 1992, vertically divide in half. Two 1991 works, both titled *Tondo*, affirm that the artist remained self-contained and full of strong feeling. Mitchell observes herself observing nature, and, in so doing, achieves visionary exactitude and strength of character.

—Donald Kuspit



Joan Mitchell, *Trees*,
1990–91, diptych,
oil on canvas, overall
7' 2¼" x 13' 1½".