

*To define a feeling:  
Joan Mitchell, 1960–1965*

Curated by Sarah Roberts

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537 West 20th Street, New York



Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, c. 1963. © Estate of Joan Mitchell

*I'm trying for something more specific than movies of my everyday life: To define a feeling.*  
—Joan Mitchell in *ARTnews*, April 1965

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Joan Mitchell that focuses on the years 1960 to 1965, a brief but critical juncture in the artist's development. Capping off a yearlong celebration of the centennial of the artist's birth, this presentation is curated by Sarah Roberts, Senior Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Joan Mitchell Foundation, and brings together a significant group of works from public and private collections, as well as that of the Joan Mitchell Foundation.

During these years, Mitchell spent many weeks each summer and fall living on a sailboat and exploring the Mediterranean from a home base along France's Côte d'Azur with her companion, painter Jean Paul Riopelle, and her works from this period are inflected by these voyages and the sites of the Mediterranean. Back in her Parisian studio, Mitchell drew on the experience of looking out at the water,

horizon, and rocky coasts, resulting in paintings that depart radically from those of the preceding years, and are distinct from those that would follow. Characterized by dark, central masses of swirling brushstrokes in deep greens and blues partially obscuring rich tonal colors embedded beneath, these turbulent canvases exchange the grounding armature that had structured much of her previous landscape-inspired work for more experimental compositional strategies. Constituting, as the poet John Ashbery described, "an unhurried meditation on bits of landscape and air," the profound, dramatic works on view offer insight into Mitchell's distinctive process in evolving the structural and chromatic composition of her paintings, while dynamically engaging many of the key themes and motifs that extend throughout her oeuvre.

As Sarah Roberts notes of the exhibition:

*For Joan Mitchell, abstract painting had a singular capacity to capture and communicate multiple layers of human experience—things seen, touched, felt, and remembered—in a single visual field. From 1960 to 1965, her days and nights included frequent Mediterranean sailing trips to Corsica and Italy with her partner Jean Paul Riopelle, time spent reading and discussing poetry with friends, deep thinking about painting, and keenly felt losses of loved ones, as well the assassination of John F. Kennedy and growing social unrest in both the US and France. Reflecting on this tumultuous period later in life, Mitchell named all these events as impacting the direction of her work. Never seeking to create direct representations of particular moments or to simply channel a single emotion or thought, she sought instead to render in paint something new that articulated the sum of experiences in all their complexity and ambiguity—to define a feeling.*

*The selection of paintings and drawings gathered here shows Mitchell at work from 1960 to 1965, responding to the sea's expanse and surrounding landscapes, and generating fresh ideas about painting itself. Central masses of densely applied paint in somber tones began to emerge in her canvases in 1960. By 1962, she had narrowed the range of hues to the darkest greens, browns, and blues, colors so deep that this group of works has frequently been referred to as the "black paintings," though true black was rarely included. Mitchell concentrated her swirling central masses into floating islands of color within subtly varied, off-white fields. Within just two years, she would shift again, opening the concentrations into constellations of loose, squared forms and tangled brushwork as she continually experimented.*

*Reflecting on recent work in her 1965 oral history with art historian Dorothy Seckler, Mitchell noted, "Clement Greenberg said there never should be a central image, so I decided to make one." With this body of work, Mitchell also patently challenged prevailing conventions of balanced composition and harmonious color, choosing an enigmatic palette with flashes of sharp contrast, shifting her "central" forms slightly off axis, and playing with backgrounds and corners. Echoes of Mediterranean light and rocky, shrub-studded coastlines were met with the turbulence and toughness in her painting technique, giving rise to one of Mitchell's most daring, moody, and probing bodies of work.*

Highlights from the exhibition include *Mandres*, c. 1962 (Private Collection, courtesy of McClain Gallery), an important transitional work that shows Mitchell beginning to experiment with central forms; *Untitled*, 1963 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), an expansive triptych characteristic of Mitchell's growing engagement with multi-panel works during this period; as well as a selection of small-scale paintings that were inspired by stations on the Paris Metro and debuted in her 1965 solo exhibition at Stable Gallery, New York, including one on loan from the Hofstra University Museum of Art. Also on view will be several large-scale paintings from the collection of the Joan Mitchell Foundation that span these years, as well as a grouping of rarely seen works on paper made using charcoal and crayon—sometimes in combination with watercolor—that extend Mitchell's exploration of form and color in a different medium.

The exhibition will be supplemented by a selection of primary materials from the archives of the Joan Mitchell Foundation. A fully illustrated catalogue with new scholarship on this period by Sarah Roberts and other authors is forthcoming from David Zwirner Books.

Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) established a singular visual vocabulary over the course of her more than four decade career. While rooted in the conventions of abstraction, Mitchell's inventive reinterpretation of the traditional figure-ground relationship and synesthetic use of color set her apart from her peers, resulting in intuitively constructed and emotionally charged compositions that alternately conjure individuals, observations, places, and points in time. Her prodigious oeuvre encompasses not only the large-scale abstract canvases for which she is best known, but also smaller paintings, drawings, and prints.

Born in Chicago and educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which she received a BFA (1947) and an MFA (1950), Mitchell moved to New York in 1949 and was an active participant in the downtown arts scene. She began splitting her time between Paris and New York in 1955, before moving permanently to France in 1959. In 1968, Mitchell settled in Vétheuil, a small village northwest of Paris, while continuing to exhibit her work throughout the United States and Europe. It was in Vétheuil that she began regularly hosting artists at various stages of their careers, providing space and support to help them develop their art. When Mitchell passed away in 1992, her will specified that a portion of her estate should be used to establish a foundation to directly support visual artists.

In 1951, Mitchell became one of the few female members of the exclusive Eighth Street Club, and, that spring, her work was included in *The Ninth Street Exhibition*, organized by charter members of The Club with the assistance of Leo Castelli, which helped to codify what became known as the New York School of primarily abstract painters. During her lifetime, Mitchell's work was exhibited in solo presentations at numerous influential galleries in the United States and Europe, including Stable Gallery, New York (1953, 1955, 1957, 1958, 1961, 1965); Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles (1961); Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris (1967, 1969, 1971, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1987, 1990, 1992); Martha Jackson Gallery, New York (1968, 1972); Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York (1976, 1977, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1986); and Robert Miller Gallery, New York (1989, 1991). The Joan Mitchell Foundation was previously represented by Cheim & Read, New York, where the artist's work was the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, in 1997, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2018.

Her first institutional solo exhibition, *My Five Years in the Country*, was held in 1972 at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York. Subsequent museum presentations during Mitchell's lifetime were held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1974, 1992); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1982); Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (traveled to Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; and La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California; 1988–1989).

In 2002, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, organized a posthumous retrospective of Mitchell's work, which traveled to Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas; and Des Moines Art Center, Iowa. In 2010, the Joan Mitchell Foundation organized *Joan Mitchell in New Orleans*, which included a symposium on her life and work, and three concurrent exhibitions held at Tulane University's Newcomb Art Gallery, New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans. In 2015, *Joan Mitchell Retrospective: Her Life and Paintings* was presented at Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Austria, and subsequently traveled to Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Additional recent museum solo presentations include those at Kunsthalle Emden, Germany (2008; traveled to Palazzo Magnani, Reggio Emilia, Italy and Musée des Impressionnismes, Giverny, France, 2009); Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (2010); and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, France (2014). In 2017, *Mitchell / Riopelle: Nothing in Moderation* opened at the Musée national des

beaux-arts du Québec and traveled to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2018); and Fonds Hélène et Édouard Leclerc, Landerneau, France (2018–2019).

A comprehensive Joan Mitchell traveling retrospective was co-organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The retrospective was first on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2021, before traveling to the Baltimore Museum of Art the following year. The exhibition was subsequently presented at Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, through 2023, where the complementary exhibition, *Monet – Mitchell*, was also on view. The Saint Louis Art Museum presented an adaptation of *Monet – Mitchell* in 2023, featuring eight works by Mitchell and two by Monet.

Mitchell's work can be found in prominent institutional collections worldwide, including the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; Anderson Collection at Stanford University, California; Art Institute of Chicago; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Nakanoshima Museum of Modern Art, Osaka, Japan; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Tate, United Kingdom; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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