

David Zwirner

New York London Paris Hong Kong

## Joan Mitchell *Paintings, 1979–1985*

November 3–December 17, 2022  
537 West 20th Street, New York



Joan Mitchell, *Then, Last Time IV*, 1985. Oil on canvas,  
102 1/4 x 78 3/4 inches (259.715 x 200.025 cm).  
© Estate of Joan Mitchell. Collection of the Joan Mitchell  
Foundation, New York. Courtesy David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of paintings by Joan Mitchell focusing on the years 1979 to 1985—a significant and deeply generative period within her decades-long career—on view at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York. Featuring paintings from both public and private collections, as well as from the holdings of the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the show coincides with the final leg of the artist's critically acclaimed retrospective—previously on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Baltimore Museum of Art—which is on view at Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris through February 27, 2023, alongside the concurrent exhibition *Claude Monet - Joan Mitchell*.

Mitchell 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 remarkable adeptness with color set her apart from her peers, and resulted 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.

For Mitchell, this period, which included her important 1982 solo exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, was a time of profound artistic development, growth, and focus on the possibilities of painting. As she became even more fully immersed in daily life at her property in Vétheuil, France—surrounded by lush gardens, and challenged and inspired by new creative relationships—Mitchell's studio practice flourished, and her work became even more ambitious and expansive.

The exhibition will include a selection of the dynamic and resolved canvases Mitchell produced during these years in a range of formats, from ambitiously scaled multipanel works that are among the largest of her career to intimate single-canvas compositions, demonstrating her transition from the controlled structure of her mid-to-late-1970s paintings to the virtuosic allover compositions of the 1980s. Executed in an increasingly bold palette, these works exemplify her nuanced mastery of composition, scale, and color.

The earliest painting in the exhibition, *Wood, Wind, No Tuba* (1979; The Museum of Modern Art, New York) marks Mitchell's triumphant reimmersion in her Vétheuil studio following the departure of Jean Paul Riopelle, her companion of more than two decades, earlier that year. Dominated by a palette of radiant orange—one of the bright and vivid hues that recurs throughout Mitchell's canvases of the early 1980s—the short, staccato brushstrokes that nearly fill the large-scale diptych suggest a renewed sense of confidence that would carry through the remainder of the artist's career. The work's title nods to her friendship with Gisèle Barreau, a young French composer who entered Mitchell's circle around this time, and whom Mitchell considered a true creative equal. Barreau would become a fixture at Vétheuil along with a revolving group of young artists with whom Mitchell exchanged ideas, drawing energy and vigor from their shared creative pursuits. Bursting with yellows, the painting *Room* (1981; Linda Pace Foundation, Ruby City) similarly reflects the bold exuberance of this new beginning as well as Mitchell's renewed connection with her natural surroundings.

Not seen publicly in more than twenty years, the quadriptych *Chez ma soeur (My Sister's House)* (1981; private collection) counts amongst Mitchell's largest paintings. Executed during a period in which her beloved sister Sally was in the throes of a protracted battle with cancer, the work draws on Mitchell's memories of time spent at Sally's home in Santa Barbara, California, poetically balancing the suggestion of a landscape with a sense of tenderness and self-contained interiority. As Mitchell wrote to the curators of her 1982 Parisian survey, in which this painting would be included, "[Painting] is the opposite of death. It permits one to survive, it also permits one to live. For me, *Chez ma soeur*, for example, is profoundly sad ... it's sadness in full sunlight as there is joy in the rain."<sup>1</sup>

A number of small-scale canvases from across this period punctuate the exhibition. Throughout her career, Mitchell played with scale, frequently creating intimately sized works in both single and multi-panel formats that reflect her overall compositional dynamism and experimental approach to her practice. Mitchell was able to easily move these compositions around her studio—recombining, comparing, and contrasting them—allowing her to create myriad variations on a theme.

By the mid-1980s, Mitchell's paintings began to shift in tone in the wake of her important *Grand Vallée* cycle of 1983 to 1984. Beginning in the summer of 1984, Mitchell experienced a number of personal health setbacks and the paintings that followed, which she bestowed with open-ended, existentially inflected titles, consequently turned inward. In canvases such as *Before, Again I* (1985; private collection) and *Between* (1985; Des Moines Art Center), Mitchell's long, calligraphic brush strokes—dominated by blues and greens—lope across the canvas. In the virtuosic *Then, Last Time IV* (1985; Joan Mitchell Foundation) the pure physicality of Mitchell's brushwork is further laid bare as the negative space that she so confidently evacuated from her works in the earlier part of the decade begins to reappear, presaging her masterful late paintings of the 1990s. Rich hues of green and blue tangle with white and areas of bare canvas, creating a dynamic play between figure and ground. Mitchell also sets up a lively

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Mitchell, quoted in *Joan Mitchell: Choix de Peintures, 1970–1982* (Paris: ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1982), n.p.

visual tension between heavily built-up areas of paint and thinner washes and skeins of paint that drip down the canvas. Throughout this time, Mitchell continued to look to painting as a means of translating her own experiences and harnessing the vitality of her impressions. She resolutely returned to her studio and continued to paint, telling art critic and philosopher Yves Michaud in 1986 simply, "There I exist in painting."<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition will be supplemented by a selection of primary materials from the archives of the Joan Mitchell Foundation. On the occasion of the exhibition, David Zwirner Books will publish a fully illustrated catalogue that will feature a reprint of Michaud's 1986 interview with the artist, as well as a new text by novelist Julie Otsuka.

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), Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) 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).

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 Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria, and subsequently traveled to Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

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<sup>2</sup> Yves Michaud, "Conversation with Joan Mitchell, January 12, 1986," in *Joan Mitchell: New Paintings* (New York: Xavier Fourcade, Inc., 1986), n.p.

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).

Mitchell's work can be found in prominent institutional collections worldwide, including Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Anderson Collection at Stanford University, California; Art Institute of Chicago; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Centre Georges 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, Shizuoka, Japan; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Tate, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. This show will be the second exhibition of Mitchell's work at David Zwirner since exclusive representation of the Foundation was announced in 2018.

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