



ART REVIEW: High-Voltage Selection of Joan Mitchell Paintings at Cheim & Read

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by Charles A. Riley II

For sheer, unbridled ecstasy in oil, nothing in Chelsea surpasses “Joan Mitchell: Paintings from the Middle of the Last Century, 1953-1962” at Cheim & Read in New York City.

This high-voltage selection of paintings begins chronologically in 1953, when Mitchell was only 28 and already at the top of her game. The crucial event in her career that year was a spring solo show at the prestigious [Stable Gallery](#) that confirmed her importance, although the excellent Cheim & Read catalogue starts with a reproduction of the black-and-white poster for a group show two years before at 60 East 9th Street that placed her in such distinguished company as [Willem de Kooning](#), [Hans Hofmann](#) and [Lee Krasner](#).

I opted to save the lone painting from 1953-54—an untitled silvery essay in subdued blues and golds—until late in my visit because it offers a pianissimo coda to the high chromaticism inside. That required a conscious effort, as the painting confronts the visitor entering from the street from the tall, secluded gallery in which Cheim & Read often isolates, to dramatic effect, major sculpture or large vertical paintings.



“UNTITLED” by Joan Mitchell, 1953-54. Oil on canvas, 81 x 69 inches.

©Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

Color is the theme in this show. When white predominates, as in *LIENS COLORÉS*, Circa 1956, then the colors have all the more room to shine on their own. Even the title of this work lends credence to the primacy of color over line in this freewheeling composition. Two artists came to mind in its gestural motions and the gradations of hue, value and chroma: [Cy Twombly](#) and [Willem de Kooning](#).

The creamy and cool whites are, as in Twombly’s work, delicately calibrated to read as warm or cool. At the painting’s center, a streak of ruby red gains density with the commingling of three bands of black. The swooping arcs and flip turns of pink and blue cut with white at the top right and lower left are close enough to the “loaded brushstrokes” of Willem de Kooning to feel a little imitative. Still, the improvisatory freedom of this and every work in the show sidelines issues of originality. It’s worth noting that Mitchell was a knowledgeable jazz fan, at a time when Manhattan’s bebop scene was in its late, dazzlingly inventive phase. Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Sonny Rollins were her favorites.



“LIENS COLORÉS” by Joan Mitchell, Circa 1956. Oil on canvas, 56 x 76 inches.
©Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

With Mitchell’s technique, it always comes down to the question of the drip. While many were attacking the canvas with saber strokes right out of a fencing manual, Mitchell was known for letting the diluted paint travel down the canvas until it found its own terminus. Narrow and wobbly as tears, the drips are particularly conspicuous near the bottom of the canvas, as in *Untitled* (1958), in which the green streams with abandon from the welter of activity above.

One of the assets of this rich exhibition is not on the walls: the slim catalogue, beautifully designed and printed, using close-up details of densely woven passages from the works in superb reproductions. Too often blow-ups like these lose their tight fidelity to the original, casualties of the printing process; thankfully this is not the case in this catalogue. A perfect example can be seen in the catalogue’s rendering of the layering of black on grey or forest green in *Slate*, 1959, which is as busy with internal strokes as the most complex of traditional Chinese characters.



“SLATE” by Joan Mitchell, 1959. Oil on canvas, 77 x 74 inches. ©Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

The text, by David Anfam—co-curator of a highly regarded 2016 exhibition devoted to Abstract Expressionism at the Royal Academy in London (reviewed on Hamptons Art Hub [here](#))—gracefully travels from the paintings to the poetry of both Hart Crane and Frank O’Hara. According to Anfam, O’Hara’s “To the Harbormaster” was a particular favorite of Mitchell’s, and the poet was one of her close friends. The connection to Crane, who had committed suicide in 1931, was more through place and the theme of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Mitchell had moved in 1947 to Fulton Street on the Brooklyn side of the East River, the same neighborhood where Crane had lived when he composed his masterful epic, which opens with the ecstatic lines: “How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest/The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him,/Shedding white rings of tumult, building high/Over the chained bay waters Liberty...”

As Anfam adroitly observes, that rhapsodic note is sounded in Mitchell’s paintings: “In four *Untitled* paintings the curves progressively control their white ambience, akin to how human dexterity at its best on a far bigger plane builds architectonic structures—as old as the Pyramids or as recent as, say, Guggenheim Bilbao—that both master and marry encompassing nature.”

Not all attempts at bridging the gap between separate disciplines are as successful, but Anfam manages it admirably. His biggest stretch is the connection made between Mitchell’s father, who built bridges in Chicago (where the artist was born and started her training) and Crane’s “The

Bridge” as well as a thematic interpretation of the sweeping gestures in the paintings. He is on more solid ground when he correlates her memory of the Great Lakes with the limpid blue and coruscating dashes of orange red in *Untitled (Blue Michigan)*, made in 1961.



“UNTITLED (BLUE MICHIGAN) by Joan Mitchell, 1961. Oil on canvas, 50 7/8 x 63 3/4 inches. ©Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

Anfam claims that Mitchell walked out of Hans Hofmann’s class in Manhattan on her first day, but virtually every time the great students of the Bavarian master are recalled, her name is among the best known artists (along with [Wolf Kahn](#) and [Fritz Bultman](#)). There are many points of comparison between Mitchell and Hofmann, not the least being the ways in which the two artists set their bright reds against herbaceous greens. The finest example of the push and pull of red and green in the Cheim & Read exhibition is *Garden Party*, 1961-62, which is barely divided by a hedge from the similar landscape-inspired abstract works made by Hofmann in Provincetown.



“GARDEN PARTY” by Joan Mitchell, 1961-62. Oil on canvas, 63 1/2 x 50 3/4 inches. ©Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

Mitchell left New York for France, where she died in 1992, and it is almost a cliché to mention her time at Monet’s Giverny. This reference too often nudges her gestures toward the semblance of lotus pads or floral beds when they ought to be left to their own devices. Her work is almost always on view at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and is in the collection of MoMA, the Tate and many other museums. Shows like this one (her ninth solo show at Cheim & Read), so expertly curated and documented, should lock Mitchell into the pantheon of major Abstract Expressionists for our time.



“Untitled” by Joan Mitchell, Circa 1958, installed in “Joan Mitchell: Paintings from the Middle of the last Century, 1953-1962” at Cheim & Read. Photo by Brian Buckley. Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.

BASIC FACTS: “Joan Mitchell: Paintings from the Middle of the Last Century, 1953-1962” is on view

from September 6 to November 3, 2018 at Cheim & Read Gallery, 547 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001. www.cheimread.com.

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