



36 **Joan Mitchell**

1925 – 1992 American

Untitled

oil on canvas triptych, signed and on verso inscribed C13972 and 1/2/3 (circled) and T (with arrow) on each canvas 13 x 27 1/4 in, 33 x 69.2 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
 Carl Plansky, New York
 Lillian Heidenberg, New York
 Woltjen/Udell Gallery, Edmonton
 Acquired from the above by the present Private Collection, Vancouver

JOAN MITCHELL WAS an American artist born in Chicago whose lifetime of serious and successful work as a painter—in New York among the New York School and in France—resulted in a rich and diverse oeuvre that is currently undergoing serious scholarly consideration. Mitchell’s *Untitled* triptych exemplifies her mature style, in which a diversity of strokes leap across the whole surface, colour and composition uniting in fluent chromatic gesture. Simultaneously compact and expansive, the work demonstrates Mitchell’s characteristically bold and accomplished painterly command, and her inventive approach to small paintings.

Mitchell’s lifelong success as a painter is not only the subject of intense scholarly consideration but also popular interest. The 2015 to 2016 Mitchell exhibition that opened in the Kunsthaus Bregenz in Austria and traveled to the Ludwig Museum in Cologne was followed in 2017 and 2018 by *Mitchell/Riopelle*:

Nothing in Moderation, which traveled from the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec to the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc pour la Culture, Landerneau, France. A Mitchell retrospective currently being co-developed by the Baltimore Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim Museum in New York will open later this year, and offers viewers an unprecedented view of the painter’s stunningly powerful paintings. The current intense interest in Mitchell’s oeuvre reflects her work’s continued vitality in a cultural moment when women artists of her generation are at last receiving the attention they have long deserved.

Although the majority of Mitchell’s paintings are larger than the triptych shown here, *Untitled* exemplifies the artist’s notion of “scale,” and its unrelatedness to size. In a 1976 film, Mitchell explained, “I love to do small paintings and I love to do big paintings ... I would like them [the small paintings] to have the same feeling of scale as the big paintings.”¹ Indeed, this triptych carries something of the light and scale Mitchell would employ in some of her monumental quadriptychs like *La Vie en Rose* (1979), in which dark strokes march along the lower edge under modulated fields of lavender-white, blue-white and grey-white, which shift restlessly above. In this *Untitled* triptych, black strokes flick over and across the complex array of whites that constitute the painting’s ground, leaping like flames, interspersed with dabs and strokes of bright cerulean blue that cavort across each of the three panels in a call-and-response of colour and form.

In its chromatic composition and contained energy, the *Untitled* triptych also suggests something of Mitchell’s 1980 *Sale Neige*, a work Mitchell called “a great painting” and that for the artist evoked “snow turning gray.”² *Untitled*, with its underlayers of colour haunting the grey-white painted over them, might

recall the early spring, with coral pink and crocus purple pressing upward into the snowmelt.

Regardless of any external referent the painting might suggest, *Untitled* is emphatically constructed as a complete triptych and finished as fully as larger works. On the paintings’ reverse, an emphatic T with upward arrow indicates the top of each painting, and for further emphasis, an identifying number common to all three canvases lurks just off-centre on each of the canvases’ middle stretcher bars, leaving no doubt that the three panels comprise a whole fully conceived and composed by the artist. The artist’s signature indicates her satisfaction with the completed work.

Small paintings recur in Mitchell’s oeuvre, yet they were not her preferred format. “I’m very far-sighted astigmatic from birth and I do better with big paintings,” Mitchell told an interviewer in 1974, adding “but I also like little paintings.”³ Despite her preference for creating larger works, Mitchell’s small paintings seem to have perpetually been in demand; archival letters from her dealers at the Stable Gallery and Martha Jackson Gallery attest to dealers’ persistent desire for more small works to sell in their galleries.

In considering the specificities of Mitchell’s ways of seeing and painting at small or large scale, the philosopher Yves Michaud has pointed to Mitchell’s use of a reducing glass to see her large paintings from an even greater distance than the physical space of her studio would allow. He wrote that she used a “reducing lens to get more perspective and to produce a small, compact image. For her, these comings and goings were in fact an integral part of the action of paintings. There was a rhythm, a pulse made up of graspings and ungraspings, absorptions and rejections, times of fascination and moments of critical perception.”⁴ Seen in this light, the small paintings can be perceived to perform an optical trick; they are miniature Mitchells. The paintings’ small format is an artistic device that allows Mitchell’s works to be seen as she intended—from a great distance—from any distance. Composing a large-scale painting on a small series of canvases, she situated the viewer where she herself liked to view the paintings, from farther away than was really possible.

This triptych, fully conceived and finished as a small and complete work, suggests Mitchell’s belief in smaller paintings as both gestures pointing towards bigger paintings and a technique of seeing. In suggesting larger works like *Les Bluets* (1973) and *Iva* (1973) whose tripartite format the work shares, *Untitled* can be seen as a big painting secreted into a smaller format. The work communicates grandly from within a compact space, paradoxically reaching beyond itself and compressing form, perhaps suggesting a practical role for *Untitled* and other small works in Mitchell’s process of envisioning her paintings.

In its form, its relation to larger works, and its inventive resituating of painterly and viewing spaces, this *Untitled* triptych is a condensed monumentality. On its surface Mitchell’s virtuosity, her unique spatial sense within and before the canvas are visible. Emphatically and purposefully made to physically distill and visually expand, this small painting exemplifies the “feeling of scale” Mitchell intended. It stretches across the space of its canvases, from Mitchell’s time to ours, across her vocabulary of



Joan Mitchell in her studio on Rue Fremicourt, with her Skye terriers Isabelle and Bertie, circa 1960
 Photo: Unknown

gesture and colour, between her mark and our viewership, full and complete.

We thank Amy Rahn for contributing the above essay. Rahn is an assistant professor of art history and director of the Charles Danforth Gallery at the University of Maine at Augusta. She recently authored a catalogue essay for the Joan Mitchell retrospective exhibition opening in 2020 at the Baltimore Museum of Art and traveling to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

1. Joan Mitchell, transcription of the artist’s comments in *Joan Mitchell à Vêtheuil*, extract from *American Artists in Europe* (Alice Hutchins, Douglas James Johnson, Joan Mitchell), directed by Angeliki Haas, 1976. Viewed at the Joan Mitchell Foundation, January 17, 2017.
2. Mitchell, quoted in Judith E. Bernstock, *Joan Mitchell* (New York: Hudson Hills in assoc. with Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1988), exhibition catalogue, 169.
3. Mitchell, interview by Kate Horsfield, *Joan Mitchell: An Interview* (New York: Video Databank, 1974; remastered and re-edited 2004), © Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, transcription by the author.
4. Yves Michaud, “Abstract Expressionism and Feeling,” in *Joan Mitchell*, by Joan Mitchell; Nils Ohlsen; Kunsthalle in Emden, Stiftung Henri Nannen.; Palazzo Magnani (Reggio Emilia, Italy); Musée américain Giverny (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2008), 71.

Accompanying this lot is a letter certifying authenticity by Douglas Udell of Douglas Udell Gallery, dated July 14, 1993. Please note: the three panels measure 13 x 8 3/4 inches, 13 x 9 1/2 inches and 13 x 8 3/4 inches.

ESTIMATE: \$400,000 – 600,000