

JOAN MITCHELL Interview with Yves Michaud (1986)

YVES MICHAUD: What inspires you to paint?

JOAN MITCHELL: When I was sick, they moved me to a room with a window and suddenly through the window I saw two fir trees in a park, and the grey sky, and the beautiful grey rain, and I was so happy. It had something to do with being alive. I could see the pine trees, and I felt I could paint. If I could see them, I felt I would paint a painting. Last year, I could not paint. For a while I did not react to anything. All I saw was a white metallic color.

YM: When you started again painting, you painted dying sunflowers. I remember that you said to me then: "At least, I can feel them."...

JM: Sunflowers are something I feel very intensely. They look so wonderful when young and they are so very moving when they are dying. I don't like fields of sunflowers. I like them alone or, of course, painted by Van Gogh.



Joan Mitchell in her New York studio in the 1950's.

YM: You talk of feeling, existing, living....

JM: Feeling, existing, living, I think it's all the same, except for quality. Existing is survival; it does not mean necessarily feeling. You can say good morning, good evening. Feeling is something more: it's feeling your existence. It's not just survival. Painting is a means of feeling "living." . . . Painting is the only art form except still photography which is without time. Music takes time to listen to and ends, writing takes time and ends, movies end, ideas and even sculpture take time. Painting does not. It never ends, it is the only thing that is both continuous and still. Then I can be very happy. It's a still place. It's like one word, one image....

YM: What do you want from a painting?

JM: I am trying to achieve anything I can. I don't set out to achieve a specific thing, perhaps to catch motion or to catch a feeling. Call it layer painting, gestural painting, easel painting or whatever you want. I paint oil on canvas--without an easel. Conventional methods. I do not condense things. I try to eliminate cliches, extraneous material. I try to make it exact. My painting is not an allegory or a story. It is more like a poem.

YM: But what is the meaning of a picture?

JM: What it means? It seems very clear what it means. I can't say it but the painting makes it clear. If I don't know, then it's not working. If it seems right to me, then it has a meaning, but I can't tell you what meaning. I can't be more specific than that. it works when it means something, when I don't question it any more.

YM: Whom do you paint for?

JM: I suppose I must paint for me and my dogs. We are in the studio and they watch. I said painting is not motion, it is not in time. I think any involvement of any kind is to forget not being alive. Painting is one of those things. I am alive, we are alive, we are not aware of what is coming next. I am afraid of death. Abandonment is death also. I mean: somebody leaves and other people also leave. I never say goodbye to people. Somebody comes for dinner and then leaves. I am very nervous. Because the leaving is the worst part. Often in my mind, they have already left before they have come. I guess this is why everyone is reproduced in my imaginary photograph album.

YM: When and how do you paint?

JM: I often paint during the night but I have nothing to do with night. I like the light. I prefer the daylight. I also work in the afternoon. I check what I have done the night before. Certain colors change enormously with electric light....

YM: When is a painting finished?

JM: When it stops questioning me. Sometimes I don't know what to do with it. Sometimes I don't know exactly what I want. I check it out, recheck it for clays or weeks. Sometimes there is more to do on it. Sometimes I am afraid of ruining what I have. Sometimes I am lazy, I don't finish it or I don't push it far enough. Sometimes I think it's a painting.

YM: Why do you prefer to talk of painting when you are in your studio?

JM: There I exist in painting. In some other place I exist differently.

YM: So you suggest that your identity is in your painting?

JM: I find a certain recognition but I don't always connect the painting with me, with that person I hear on the tape, although the ideas are familiar. I imagine a sort of scaffolding made of painting stretchers around a lot of colored chaos as an identity. I am an outsider, I happen to live in France, I am an alien. So for my identity I need to know where I am, to look at maps. I want to know where the north is, and Vetheuil, and New York, and what street I am on.

YM: Do you recognize yourself in your paintings? Are they a part of you, or an image, or something specially connected with you?

JM: I don't know. I have often questioned, "Did I do that?" on seeing a painting of mine unexpectedly in some place. It has become disconnected. Once they leave the studio, they go and it is another sort of abandonment. When my paintings left my studio for New York recently, I was in the garden and the trees and the garden were beautiful and there was a beautiful light and I saw the paintings moving. A big strong man moved them with great ease and I saw all their colors behind the trees moving and it was like a parade and I was happy. I did not feel abandoned for a change. But a painting is not part of me. Because when I do paint, I am not aware of myself. As I said before, I am "no hands," the painting is telling me what to do. So it is not really a part of me at all. It is part of something else. Communication is very difficult.

I want to paint the feeling of a space. It might be an enclosed space, it might be a vast space. It might be an object working with Hofmann's phrase "push and pull," the structure, the light, the space, the color.

YM: What about your type of painting, your style or your technique?

JM: Abstract is not a style. I simply want to make a surface work. This is just a use of space and form: it's an ambivalence of forms and space. Style in painting has to do with labels. Lots of painters are obsessed with inventing something. When I was young, it never occurred to me to invent. All I wanted to do was paint. I was so and still I am in such adulation of great painters. If you study a Matisse, the way paint is put on and the way he puts on white, that's painting technique. I wanted to put on paint like Matisse. I worked hard at that a very long time ago. Someone said to me recently with surprise: "But you don't paint in 'series,' you paint pictures, each painting is different." And I thought: no, I paint paintings.

Yves Michaud, excerpts from "Conversations with Joan Mitchell, January 12, 1986," in *Joan Mitchell: New Paintings* (New York: Xavier Fourcade, 1986), n.p.