ARTS & BOOKS

# The exile factor

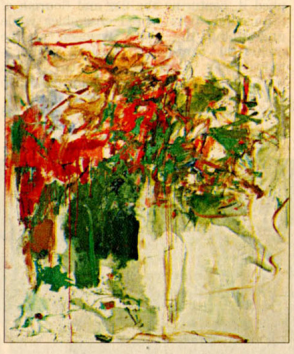
*Abstract expressionist Joan Mitchell was an American in France, and a woman in a man's movement. By Jackie Wullschlager*

North or south of the border, the best, most exhilarating, most affecting exhibition of paintings in Britain this summer is the display of a dozen canvases and pastels by Joan Mitchell at Inverleith House, situated at the top of Edinburgh's Botanic Gardens. According to Paul Nesbitt, Inverleith's director, no artist has yet turned down an invitation to show at this gallery, so flattering is its combination of high, bright neoclassical rooms flooded with natural light and surrounding parkland of ancient trees and sweeping lawns. Art here coexists seamlessly with nature, and from "Garden Party" (1962), a raging, just resolved tangle of greens and ochres, to the squat, stabbing lemon and mauve strokes dancing about a deep olive centre in the diptych "Cypress" (1980), Mitchell has never looked more seductive as a painter of landscape and light than she does here.

Mitchell was born in 1925 in Chicago – her frequent broad expanses of cool, bluish whites evoke the city's winter skies and glassy lakes – and died in 1992. Richly educated in literature by her mother, who with Harriet Monroe edited the modern verse journal Poetry, she was a natural lyric painter. From her grandfather, a bridge engineer, came the family fortune and an inheritance as important – an interest in structure, evident in the grand scaffolding of her compositions. From her father she learned iron discipline – he urged her on as champion figure skater, tennis player, diver, and an athlete's physicality and intuition is sustained throughout her work.

All these qualities are demonstrated in Inverleith's cherry-picked selection, mostly from private collections – astonishingly, Mitchell's first show in a British public gallery. It confirms her as an abstract expressionist of the top rank, equal in scope and conviction to Pollock and de Kooning, and in confident dialogue with art history's greats. A large "Sunflower" painting from 1969, for example, offers the hint of a blue vase anchoring a mass of whirling, curving, blossoming, falling marks in spun gold, mango-orange, amber, apricot, saffron, sulphur: as fraught, original a response to Van Gogh as was ever made in its mix of deliberate, accumulated painterly passages and the chance drips, splatters and smears that energise the picture and record the adventure of its creation.

"She could make yellow heavy," remarked Brice Marden in admiration of how every stroke in such a work takes on a separate personality, soaring, floating, hovering, sagging. The changing densities are achieved by Mitchell's mastery of colour harmonies and dissonances, which have at once an American crispness, and – after her move to France in the 1960s – a European tenor. The 1969 "Sunflower" piece references not only Van Gogh; there are memories of the lush interiors of Vuillard and Bonnard, of de Kooning's strawberry and flesh tones, of Monet's cobalts and violets. Mitchell bought an estate in Vétheuil on the banks of the Seine, where Monet had lived in the 1870s; her address was 12 rue Claude Monet.



**Luminous** From top: 'Cypress' (1980); 'Joan Mitchell with 'Bridge', 1957; 'Garden Party' (1961-62)
Rudy Burckhardt

The French connection – that she quit Manhattan for Paris as she hit her stride – is one of three reasons why Mitchell's significance was and still is unacknowledged within the American canon. The others are that she was a woman, and that she belonged to the movement's second generation. Ceaselessly angry, outspoken and resentful, she felt her marginalised position keenly. Yet, as this selection showcases, each factor which isolated her also contributed crucially to what made her unique as a painter: creatively, loneliness was a strength.

"First Cypress" (1964), this show's most sombrely beautiful work, is a typical Mitchell picture: a thick bank of dark paint, built up from many nervy layers of greens, greys, black, occupies the centre and both absorbs and sparks the plethora of darting calligraphic loops, trickles, scrawls, which animate a sparse ground. All the contradictions and complexities of Mitchell are here: airy lightness contrasts with the suggestion of an existential void; gestural freedom is balanced by careful composition; rushing whips of paint cannot conceal the underlying poetry. Some of the mark-making is as furious and tortured as Pollock's or de Kooning's, yet Mitchell is as at ease with the delicate stroke, the finessed detail – as a woman, she eschews macho posturing and bravado, and so achieves something more intricate, personal. Living in France underlined that refinement, and so did the sense of being at the end of a tradition – a place where new ground is broken edgily, subtly, not by out-and-out assault on the past.

That quality of lateness is especially apparent now, possibly because this show includes some stunning pastels made in 1992 – notably a luminous bouquet-like composition of pale greys, greens, a warm touch of red, scribbled over with knots of black when Mitchell was dying of lung cancer and unable to work on canvas, and so brought her frenzied energy to bear on works on paper. As pertinent though, I suspect, is that British audiences have just started, since Tate's 2008 retrospective, to take seriously Cy Twombly, another painter whose work hinges on lateness – on an intoxication with antiquity and its resonance with the faded grandeur of European modernism where both Twombly and Mitchell chose to site their work.

No artist more closely parallels Mitchell in painterly interest, development, inspiration and biography than Twombly. Born within three years of each other, both were shaped by the influence of Pollock and co, then fled to Europe as soon as they achieved recognition. Neither could have worked anywhere else: while pop art – Mitchell derided it as "pop, slop and plop" - and conceptualism ruled New York, Mitchell in France and Twombly in Italy alone held up the American abstract expressionist aesthetic in a sort of internal exile.

Sometimes Mitchell evokes Twombly precisely: the blue streaks falling like summer rain in the three "Tilleul" paintings here recall his elegiac, downward coursing streams, while ecstatic clots of vermilion, crimson, aquamarine at the top and bottom of an otherwise spare, American-empty untitled 1969 canvas anticipate his "Four Seasons". But mostly the two share more generally a lyrical approach, that sense of being in the moment that resonates with the effect of lyric poetry – each named Rilke as a favourite writer – and concerns of memory and nature's mutability.

"I paint from landscapes of the memory I carry with me," Mitchell wrote. "I prefer to leave nature to itself. I do not intend to improve it. I could never mirror it. I love most of all what it leaves inside me." Inverleith is the perfect setting for an introduction to her work; its excellent show should be a taster for a major European museum retrospective as soon as possible.

*'Joan Mitchell', Inverleith House, Edinburgh, to October 3. www.rbge.org.uk*