

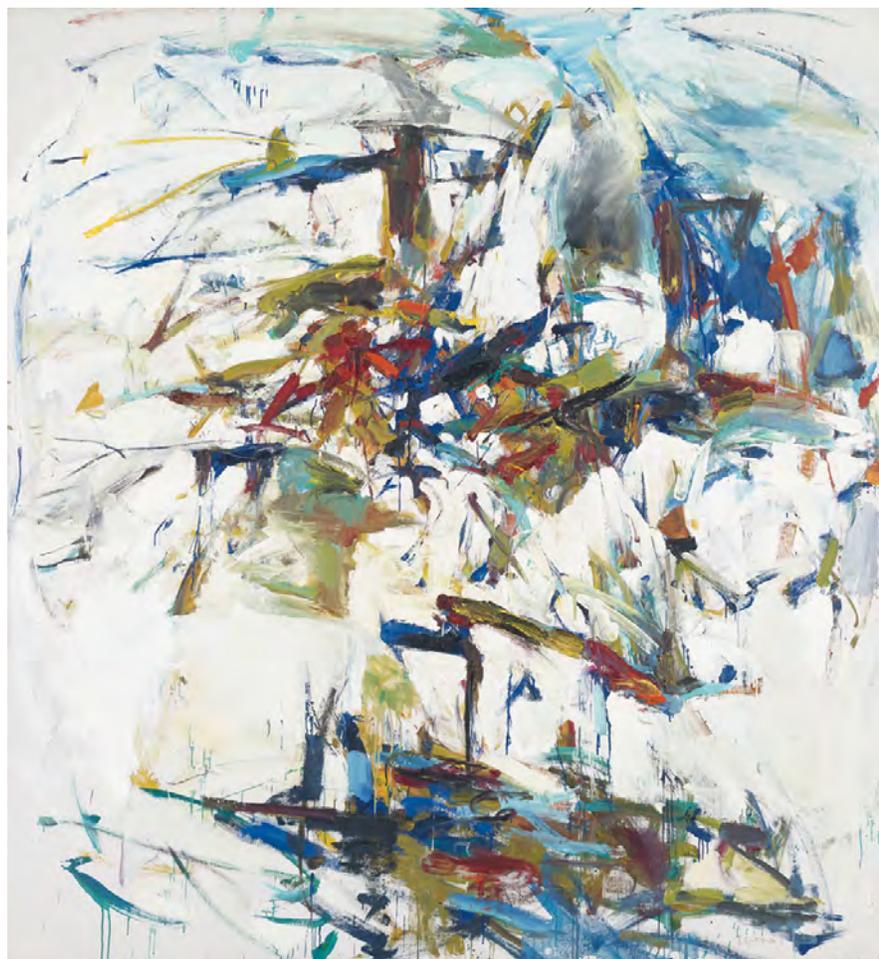
# ARTFORUM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## VOLUME JUDGEMENT

Elise Archias on the art of Joan Mitchell



Joan Mitchell, *George Went Swimming at Barnes Hole, but It Got Too Cold*, 1957, oil on canvas, 87 3/4 × 78 1/4". © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

**JOAN MITCHELL'S PAINTINGS** from the late 1950s have space in them. They are big

surfaces covered with marks, like most Abstract Expressionist paintings made in New York in the same decade, and so they look much flatter than a carefully measured perspectival scene from the 1940s by, for example, Edward Hopper. But compared with almost everything her most productive and now famous peers were doing at the same time, Mitchell's paintings are practically voluminous.

Consider her *George Went Swimming at Barnes Hole, but It Got Too Cold*, 1957, for example, alongside Helen Frankenthaler's *Round Trip*, 1957. Both pictures invite us to reflect on their dialogue with the landscape-painting tradition, Frankenthaler's via green triangular "mountains" and a blue "lake" in the foreground, Mitchell's with the suggestion of a horizon line in the upper right corner and the titular swimming hole. *Round Trip* showcases a variety of painterly techniques. It is as if Frankenthaler chose each one for its capacity to oppose one of the others: dripping counters drawing; staining denies outlining; Lascaux-like ochre smudges must make room for academic cliché. She arrays these gestures within the square canvas so that they remain distinct while also adding up to a recognizable-enough scene—a mountain vista with stick figures on the ground and citationally (not sincerely) primitivist deities floating in the sky. By contrast, Mitchell's entire composition is built up out of her own handwritten strokes. The longer we look, the more the darkly colored ones amass into objects and indentations with volume and depth, while the eddies of cream and white vivify the empty space around these masses and hollows. Mitchell's picture is messy, but it feels like a world in which there are interiors, exteriors, boundaries, and physical relationships. Nothing aside from its colors resembles the surfaces of the earthly world we live in, but I think the way darkness and light create pockets of space in her paintings functions as an abstracted version of what it feels like to move through the world as an embodied subject. As Dore Ashton put it in 1958, Mitchell's consistent subject is "the way we move in space and the adventures that befall within that abstract, but to us inevitably 'real,' entity."<sup>1</sup>

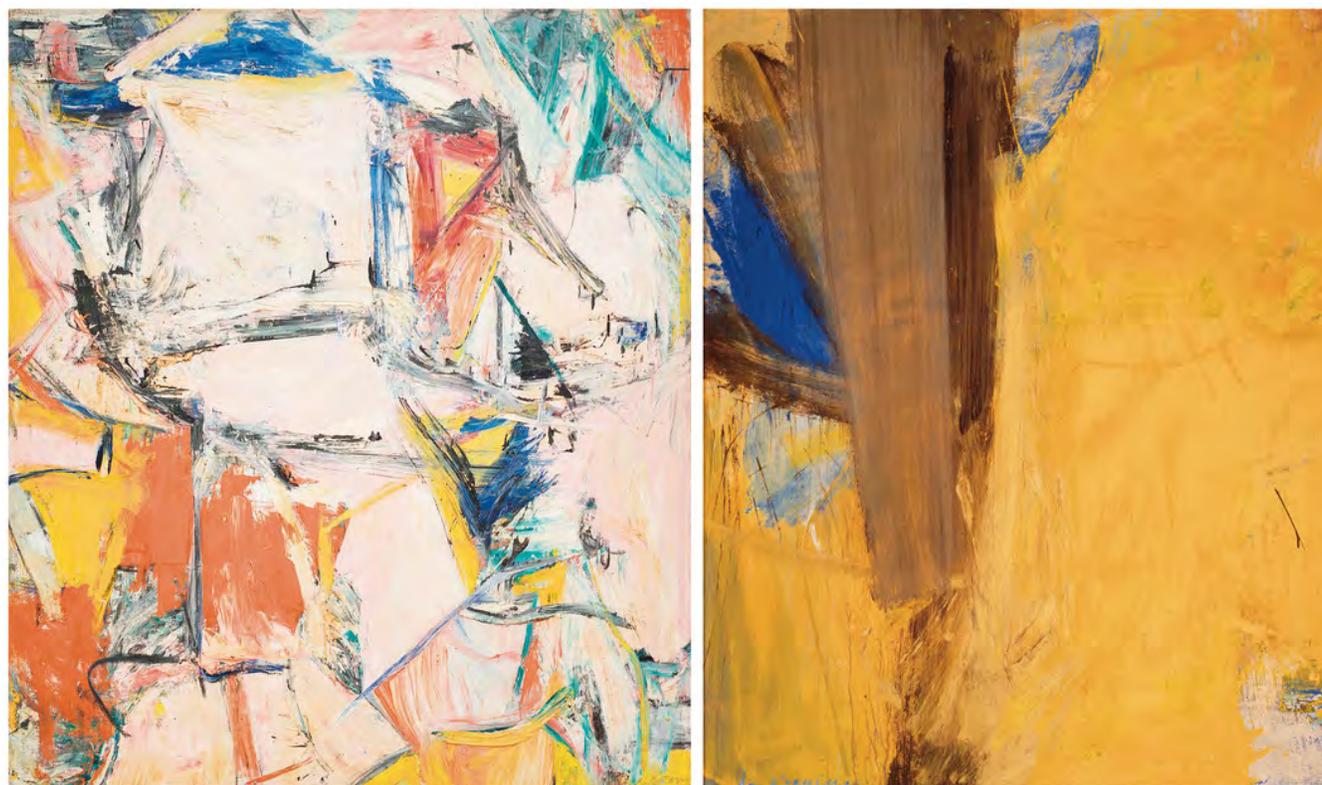


**Helen Frankenthaler, *Round Trip*, 1957**, oil on canvas, 70 1/4 × 70 1/4". © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Mitchell's paintings of the late '50s again and again rely on a sensitive and unique understanding of *how* human beings recognize what is around them as solid or empty, dense or airy, firmly delineated or porous and trailing off. Mitchell articulates this understanding in her art as if vision were the least important of the senses to it. Not unimportant, not absent; it's as if it were vision from the side, a memory of how something never examined carefully in the first place looked. Much more important is the way one experiences the density of other entities in relation to the feeling of one's own body as a physical thing with hollowness and solidity, invisible interiors and edges. An edge in Mitchell's work is never a line. Rather, it is a site where the relationships to everything else in the pictorial space begin. And that space is simultaneously literal (two-dimensional) and illusory (three-dimensional).

One way to sum up this comparison of Mitchell with Frankenthaler is to appreciate that *Round Trip* is a picture that asks to be *read*. It offers types of *signs* that Frankenthaler makes work together, in part through her citation of the conventions of landscape painting, playfully instigating the clash of these different signs' connotations of accident and intentionality, contemporary commercial art and ancient authenticity.<sup>2</sup> If we wish to take in

*George Went Swimming*, our ability to read pictorial signs will not help us much beyond the initial moment of recognizing the style as “gestural abstraction.” Rather, to get a handle on it, we find ourselves again feeling it swell forward and recede, become thick in certain places and diluted in others, pour its contents from one plane of the scape to another, and peel back a layer to reveal something behind. Importantly, most of the action is concentrated toward the middle, away from the frame, vaguely mirroring the structure of human embodiment.



From left: **Willem de Kooning, *Interchanged*, 1955**, oil on canvas, 79 × 69". © The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. **Willem de Kooning, *Montauk Highway*, 1958**, oil and mixed media on paper mounted on canvas, 58 × 48". © The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

This embodied spatial thinking that we find in Mitchell’s late-’50s works matters because it is so different from Color Field painting, which was seen by many at the time as the medium’s most innovative and meaningful contemporary advancement. (Some thought the exhibitions by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg at New York’s Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958 were more ambitious, but I want to focus on the part of the art world that was not ready to abandon the traditional aims of painting to the extent that they were.) *Round Trip*

is more like a coloring-book page than like a Color Field, but it displays an attitude toward volume similar to that of Frankenthaler's many broader, more open compositions. Clement Greenberg's influential championing of Frankenthaler's stain technique alongside the flat canvases of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland is well known, as is Michael Fried's theorization of the "opticality" and "statement"-like quality of the latter two artists plus Jules Olitski.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most persuasive evidence that "the field" constituted the dominant aesthetic for American modern painters during this transitional period (before Pop and Minimalism took over) is the sheer number of artists who adopted its formal qualities after having previously offered something quite different: either a much more dimensional space or a much more additive and varied, rather than repetitive, arrangement of shapes. The ins and outs of Willem de Kooning's *Interchanged*, 1955, bear little resemblance to the slathered yellow surface of *Montauk Highway*, 1958; the centralized ring of Norman Lewis's *Arctic Night*, 1951–52, contrasts starkly with the pixelated horizontal expanse of *Untitled (Barker and Crowd or Torch)*, 1960; Georgia O'Keeffe's deep bull's-eye surrounded by diaphanous layers in *Black Iris III*, 1926, seems to have nothing to do with the one-thing-after-another wideness of her "Sky Above Clouds" series, begun in 1962.

**Mitchell's paintings of the late '50s again and again rely on a sensitive and unique understanding of *how* human beings recognize what is around them as solid or empty, dense or airy, firmly delineated or porous and trailing off.**

Mitchell clearly is not convinced by the rhetoric of the field. In paintings such as *August, Rue Daguerre*, ca. 1956; *Hemlock*, 1956; *Evenings on 73rd Street*, 1957; *George Went Swimming*; *Ladybug*, 1957; *Piano Mécanique*, 1957; and *Cercando un ago*, ca. 1959, her approach to form demands our analysis as a serious project to which she committed years of thought. During this period, Mitchell consistently painted a sort of hovering spherical shape, or "armature," as Paul Schimmel so aptly designated it in 1984.<sup>4</sup> Her pictures offer this abstract central form with enough suggestion of depth that it appears to exist in a three-dimensional space. (Mitchell *would* broaden and flatten her work in the '70s with

paintings such as *Closed Territory*, 1973, and *La Vie en Rose*, 1979, among others, but even most of these later paintings never lost their powerful sense of internal relationship and coherence.)



Joan Mitchell, *August, Rue Daguerre*, ca. 1956, oil on canvas, 82 1/8 × 69". © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

As Greenberg stressed, crucial to the field aesthetic was the idea of an all over composition and an overwhelming and *disorienting* space that enveloped the viewer, providing no “ground” within the frame to place her.<sup>5</sup> Further, with its large size and frequent presentation of a repeatable pattern or texture, a field painting seems to reach beyond the boundaries of the picture frame into the room. Michael Leja has explored how such pictures began to be regarded right after World War II by critics and collectors—predominantly white American and European men—who shared a sensibility centered on “self-discovery in a troubled era” with the audience for *Life*, *Time*, and other major producers of “dominant culture” in the United States.<sup>6</sup> These viewers and readers

responded best to representations not of heroic achievement, which had come to feel like an oppressive cultural myth, but rather of anxiety and feelings of helplessness in the face of the incomprehensible forces that seemed now to control the world.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, when we contemplate photographs of atom bombs exploding over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act's gutting of labor unions, the mobilization of American modern art on behalf of coca-colonialism, or other developments of the early Cold War era, we can sympathize with these feelings of passivity. The love of the field can be seen as a symptom of a resurgence of the Romantic embrace of the sublime in art and in culture more broadly.

But as the '40s became the '50s, and as the professional managerial class increased their capital alongside the wealthiest during the economic boom (with both of these social classes reaping the benefits of federal laws passed in the mid-'50s that made art purchases tax-deductible), identification with anxiety, passivity, and isolated individualism became not just stylish but also a convenient posture for justifying one's winner-take-all politics.<sup>8</sup> In this light, we might start to see the embrace of the field as, in fact, a *comfortable* choice for artists and buyers. The choice of helplessness as the feeling most in step with the zeitgeist—the signal theme, affect, subject position—led decidedly away from any nagging awareness of responsibility for the old modern project of constructing a more just social order.





Joan Mitchell, *Hemlock*, 1956, oil on canvas, 91 × 80". © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

In fairness, it must be said that Greenberg recognized the aspects of the field aesthetic that warranted critical reflection early on. In his 1948 essay “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” he wrote:

This very uniformity, this dissolution of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation, into the accumulation of similar units of sensation, seems to answer something deep-seated in contemporary sensibility. It corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other. It may speak for a monist naturalism that takes all the world for granted and for which there are no longer either first or last things, the only valid distinction being that between the more and the less immediate.<sup>9</sup>

Later, in 1961, we hear Greenberg soothe some of these worries about a world without human values or judgments by pulling back from the sublimity of the field aesthetic in an analysis of Jackson Pollock. He emphasizes the “unity” that Pollock is able to “[inject] into patterns of color, shape, and line that would otherwise seem as repetitious as wallpaper.”<sup>10</sup> In this argument, certain conventions of painting ultimately win out in the face of an infantile ocean of immediacy, providing the sense of one human being making something specific and individual within the shared frameworks of culture. Endlessness and accident are allowed into the painting as qualities, as components—but, crucially, are counterbalanced by other attributes within the relationships that constitute the artwork’s form. Greenberg is here asserting the long-held dialectical priorities of modern art, which T. J. Clark reiterated and expanded on in his 1999 discussion of the simultaneous persistence of “dissonance” and “lyric” in New York School painting.<sup>11</sup> The conditions may have been chaotic, but what the individual subject made of them still mattered.



Joan Mitchell, *Evenings on 73rd Street*, 1957, oil on canvas, 75 × 85". © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

In a related vein, Meyer Schapiro includes field painters Mark Rothko and Pollock in his 1957 discussion of contemporary abstract art. For him, the stakes are highest around this work in its insistence that the particularity of individual feeling still be an essential element of art, necessary in its battle against consumerist shallowness and organization-oriented bureaucratic (non)thinking. “It is primarily in modern painting and sculpture,” he wrote, “that such contemplativeness and communion with the work of another human being, the sensing of another’s perfected feeling and imagination, becomes possible.”<sup>12</sup> Note Schapiro’s emphasis on metaphors of relationship rather than “monist naturalism.”

I review this small segment of the literature to show that, though the aesthetic of the field came to stand as a badge of contemporary ambitiousness in art circa 1957, it was surrounded by a complex conversation. Within it, Mitchell’s choice to *not* completely flatten out the world, or to relegate relationships either to literal space off-screen or to

surfaces on which flat signs are read, makes more sense and is all the more impressive. In her paintings of 1957 to 1960, we see her stubbornly asserting something else. Given how thoroughly Pop art would, by 1963, embrace its version of the field as sign/advertisement /label/billboard, Mitchell's decision to paint the way she did should be given greater historical significance than it has been so far. Her work suggests there was another way of thinking about things, an alternative to simply destroying the easel picture and giving ourselves over to the pleasures of a nonrelational dissolution and disorientation. To be sure, we hear Greenberg and Fried, too, reaching for alternatives to the histrionics of the dominant culture described by Leja, but they feel they must reject all reference to the body in space, whereas Mitchell doesn't.

**Rather than dismiss the aspects of Mitchell's work that tied it to tradition as inherently conservative, we might think of their presence as stalwartly defending a decidedly modern way of encountering the world at a time when it was being displaced and abandoned.**

Though her style was not widely imitated, Mitchell's work consistently sold in the '50s, and she had representation through Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery, New York, beginning in 1953.<sup>13</sup> The gallery advisory board agreed unanimously to bring the young Mitchell onto the roster, whereas none of Ward's other artists (among them Rauschenberg and Jack Tworkov) had been admitted without debate, according to Elaine de Kooning.<sup>14</sup> This quick acceptance is perhaps attributable to Mitchell's slashing paint strokes, which fit the period demand for "anxiety" and for a "safer" (read: whiter) version of jazz-inspired improvisation. But her earliest critics also recognized something more "sturdy" in her pictures, something closer to "the greatest masters of modern art."<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Calas (in 1952), Leo Steinberg (in 1956), and Ashton (in 1958) praised her paintings for corralling immediacy, intensity, and chance into something that included "intentions" and "the willed act."<sup>16</sup> In addition to the passage quoted above, Ashton wrote on multiple occasions about "space" in Mitchell's work.<sup>17</sup> The fact that something about Mitchell's art resembled traditional painting's illusion of three-dimensionality is no surprise. She herself spoke openly about her respect for the art of the past—for French painting in particular—and

about her lifelong desire to join the ranks of the great painters in the European tradition.<sup>18</sup>

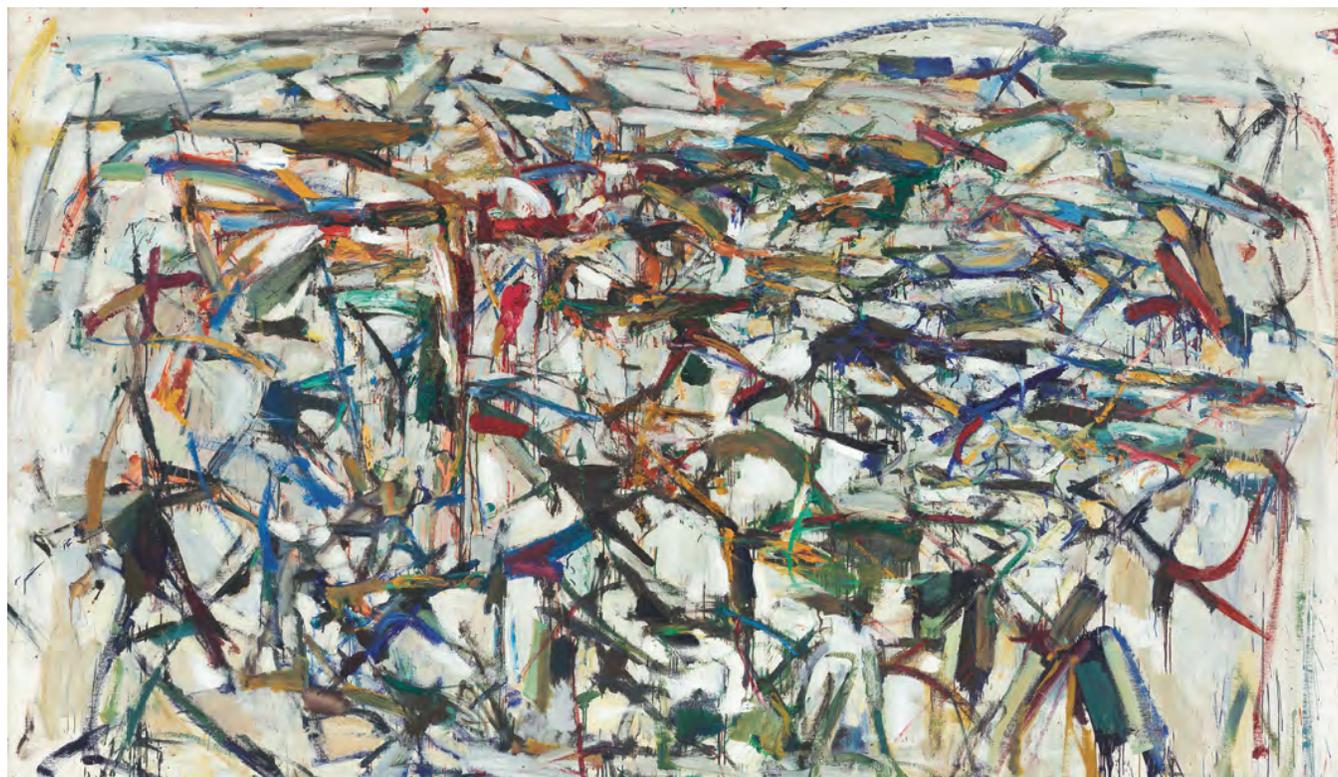


Joan Mitchell, *Ladybug*, 1957, oil on canvas, 77 7/8 × 108". © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

Rather than dismiss the aspects of her work that tied it to tradition as inherently conservative, we might think of their presence as stalwartly defending a decidedly modern way of encountering the world at a time when it was being displaced and abandoned. Mitchell's paintings presume a thinking self with senses offering up its understanding to other such selves assumed to be engaged in a similar process, a similar struggle to figure out what's right and what to do every day to fulfill needs and desires. Her canvases do not ask you to identify with sublimity (as subject or as agent). They do not flatter your visual literacy or multicultural knowledge. They do not name you. They do ask you to care about figuring something out using your embodied concepts. And they invoke a long history of art to justify the importance of such invitations in defining and reinforcing the notion of humanity at the core of modern thought—a notion combining abstraction with physicality

in such a way that, as Eric Santner has argued, the rarefied body of the sovereign was displaced in the deepest sites of the cultural imaginary by the concrete body of the People.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the artists circa 1960 who continued to energetically work within and develop languages of modernist abstraction were women, were Black, were born in colonized or recently decolonized countries. This fact alone makes clear that to dismiss modernist abstract painting from this period as conservative or naively retro would be wrong. Mark Godfrey, Catherine Craft, Elizabeth Harney, and Chika Okeke-Agulu have done especially important work in centering underknown midcentury artists such as William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Iba N'Diaye, and Colette Omogbai. As art historians, we need to continue to investigate the many abstract propositions about struggle, contradiction, and the achievement of a coherence that acknowledges dissonance, chaos, and the intransigence of materiality. We also need to correctly historicize and theorize these propositions—offered in the midst of the civil rights movement, decolonization, and a burgeoning feminist wave—as concrete articulations of the meaning found in a newly won power to shape public life.





Joan Mitchell, *Piano mécanique*, 1957, oil on canvas, 6' 6" × 10' 4 7/8". © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

In the context of the neoliberal effort to redistribute wealth back to the top, underway since the '70s, it has been convenient for art to tell collectors as well as college-educated audiences, whose capital is more social than financial, that the most important truth worth holding onto is that we are all subject to omnipotent forces we should endlessly describe in the name of vigilant critique. What better metaphor for the global capitalist market than the overwhelming field? Aesthetically, the field supported the idea that the market was something that people had not created and therefore could not reform or displace with another economy. Here I am echoing the late David Graeber (whose words have shown up a lot since his death in 2020): “The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.”<sup>20</sup> The field and the pleasures of the sublime hide the fact that in human social life there are needs, rooted in the body, and there are institutional structures created in three-dimensional space for meeting them. Mitchell’s midcentury modern art and its advocates show us that there existed a minority who did not choose to hide this idea that is so fundamental to the still-unrealized modern project of reorganizing the world and building a society that will no longer give the bulk of the joys and freedoms to a wealthy elite. For what it held onto and for what it tried to bring forward, this art still needs to be written into history.

*Elise Archias* is an associate professor of art history at University of Illinois, Chicago, and author of *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (Yale, 2016).



Joan Mitchell, *Cercando un ago*, ca. 1959, oil on canvas, 63 × 67". © Estate of Joan Mitchell.

## NOTES

1. Dore Ashton, "Art: Younger Generation," *New York Times*, March 4, 1958, 59, and Ashton, "Art," *Arts & Architecture*, May 1958, 29.
2. My reading of Frankenthaler relies on Anne Wagner, "Pollock's Nature, Frankenthaler's Culture," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 181–200.
3. See Michael Fried, "Morris Louis," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 119, 128, and Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965). Thanks to Becky Bivens for help with Fried on Olitski.
4. Paul Schimmel, "The Lost Generation," in *Action, Precision: The New Direction in New York, 1955–60* (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 2016), 38.
5. "All-over" is Greenberg's term, taken from his 1961 revision of "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," discussed below. See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 155.
6. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 4.

7. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 2, 7, 280–83, 318.
8. My understanding of this history is informed by Andrew Hoberek, *Twilight of the Middle Class: Post–World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). On the effects of the new tax laws on the New York art market, see Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2017), 550. See Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York: Knopf, 2018.)
9. Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” (1948), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 224.
10. Clement Greenberg, “The Jackson Pollock Market Soars” (1961), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 110.
11. T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 336–40, 401–403.
12. Meyer Schapiro, “Recent Abstract Painting” (1957), in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 40, 41.
13. See Stable Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
14. Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women*, 474.
15. See Ashton, “Art: Younger Generation,” 59, and Nicolas Calas, *Joan Mitchell* (New York: New Gallery, 1952), 1.
16. Calas, *Joan Mitchell*, 1; Leo Steinberg, “Month in Review,” *Arts*, January 1956, 46, and Ashton, “Art,” 29.
17. Ashton, “Art: Younger Generation,” 59, and Ashton, “Art,” 29.

18. See Joan Mitchell, “Conversations with Joan Mitchell, January 12, 1986,” by Yves Michaud, in *Joan Mitchell: New Paintings* (New York: Xavier Fourcade, 1986), n.p., and Mitchell, “Interview with Joan Mitchell,” by Dorothy Seckler, May 21, 1965, New York, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

19. Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

20. See David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 89.

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