

# LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

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## Joan Mitchell

### Petit

Small paintings, works on paper, 1953-1992

June 25 – August 16, 2002

Tuesday-Saturday 10-6

We are presenting an exhibition of paintings by Joan Mitchell to run concurrently with the retrospective of her work opening this month at the Whitney Museum. Ours is also a retrospective survey, but where the museum's exhibition emphasizes Mitchell's large and monumental paintings, we have chosen to explore her extraordinary accomplishments on an intimate scale. In addition to nearly twenty paintings, our exhibition will also include a selection of drawings and prints.

Mitchell was particularly masterful at the extreme ends of the size spectrum. Whether large or small, she said "I want them to hold one image, despite all the activity."<sup>1</sup> When working large, Mitchell stepped back as far as her studio permitted and used a diminishing glass she kept there, to compress the picture and see the image rather than the activity. Indeed, at twelve to twenty-six feet wide, her largest works are best appreciated from a distance.

Mitchell's small paintings require and reward a closer look. Painting them provided the artist opportunities to explore markmaking, texture and color, to experiment with compositional structures, to reiterate themes developing in larger paintings and to reinvent them. She worked on small paintings frequently, often for a long time. They provided a way into new cycles of work and a coda to conclude a finished series. They are concise and complete and often ravishingly beautiful. A chosen few were the only of her own works which she ever hung in her house.

In her small paintings, we can sense the deep appreciation Mitchell had for the works which originally inspired her to paint: "Van Gogh, Matisse, Cezanne. Also Renoir, Manet and Goya...Titian and Chardin...Soutine and Kandinsky."<sup>2</sup> Mitchell's loyalty to the traditions of painting, particularly nineteenth century and early twentieth century French painting, was formed in her youth by her exposure to the extraordinary paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. Once she herself began to live and work in France, she used the same handmade paints, ordered her small canvases in the same traditional formats and sizes, and created works which strive for the clarity and brilliance, for the sheer visual poetry achieved by the great modern masters.

Joan Mitchell was also inspired by Gorky, de Kooning and Pollock, by Guston and Kline; she was very much a New York School Abstract Expressionist, as ill-fitting as she found that label. She embraced it all and aspired to fill her paintings with the qualities which mattered most to her – light and feeling. During the course of a

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<sup>1</sup> Tucker, Marcia. *Joan Mitchell*. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Sandler, Irving. "Mitchell Paints a Picture," *Artnews*, October 1957.

passionately engaged life as a painter Mitchell made her own unique and original contribution to the history of painting, one in which the freedom and ambition of her generation is tempered by the grace of her ancestors.

I came to know Joan Mitchell well during the last fifteen years of her life, and offer two personal footnotes regarding small-scale works:

1. In 1988 I was with Joan Mitchell at the National Gallery in Washington. We paid a visit to the ground-floor gallery where the small French paintings donated by Ailsa Mellon Bruce and Paul Mellon were, and still are, on view in a gallery specially designed for their display. She looked intently at certain works, and quizzed me – “Which is better, the Bonnard or Vuillard?” she asked, “Bonnard,” I answered. “Vuillard, of course,” she replied. “These Renoirs are not bad, either.”

2. The only time I ever saw Joan Mitchell at work was at the Limestone Press in San Francisco in 1989. She was well-versed in printmaking, having made etchings, lithographs and screenprints at various times since 1959. She was working on a series of etchings, using a sugarlift aquatint technique in which a solution of sugar and ink is painted directly on a clean copper plate – the plates Joan used were no larger than six by six inches. I watched as she channelled the energy of her characteristic full-bodied, athletic gesture into a tiny, incredibly deft movement which flowed from her wrist to her fingers and emerged at the tip of her brush. No rush, no hesitation, no uncertainty – the image was just suddenly there.

Jill Weinberg Adams  
New York, June 1, 2002