

# LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

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## Joan Mitchell

### Paintings from the Fifties

**The show has been extended through April 16, 2011**  
**Tuesday-Saturday 10-6**

**For additional information, please contact Jill Weinberg Adams at [info@lennonweinberg.com](mailto:info@lennonweinberg.com)**



*Untitled, 1951*

The exhibition presents fourteen paintings and is accompanied by a 48-page catalogue illustrating a larger selection of Joan Mitchell's work of the 1950s. Most have not been exhibited or published before, and they add to our understanding of the fast-moving developments that took place during this first decade of Mitchell's mature work.

Joan Mitchell was born in 1925 and graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1947. Following a brief stay in New York and a year in France, she arrived here at the end of 1949 determined to be an active member of New York's diverse and progressive community of painters. She set up a studio and began meeting the older artists whose work had begun to attain recognition as well as painters of her own generation. They gathered at the Cedar Bar and showed up at each other's openings in the galleries that exhibited the work of the artists identified with Abstract Expressionism.



*Untitled, 1954-55*

She sought out de Kooning, Kline and Guston, was welcomed into "The Club" and saw Gorky's 1951 retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum. Mitchell was invited to contribute a painting to the historic Ninth Street Show and had her first solo exhibition at the New Gallery at the beginning of 1952. That same year she moved into a studio at 60 St Mark's Place that would be her primary residence until the end of the decade. She began exhibiting regularly at the Stable Gallery and established her reputation as one of the most talented painters of this dynamic era.



*Untitled, c. 1958*

Our exhibition features several major paintings. *Untitled, 1951*, was included in the New Gallery show. This boldly colored and painterly post-cubist work makes evident her interest in Kandinsky and Gorky, and reflects Mitchell's ambition to make large-format paintings, one of the significant hallmarks of Abstract Expressionism. *Untitled, 1954-55*, is a companion, perhaps predecessor, to *City Landscape* in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago and shares with that work an accumulation of small, swift, overlapping marks dawning in a segmented atmosphere of warm and cool neutral tones. (It is a testament to the measure of Mitchell's recognition today that *City Landscape* hangs in the first gallery of postwar paintings with Willem de Kooning's *Excavation* (1950) and Jackson Pollock's *Greyed Rainbow* (1953.)



*Untitled (La Fontaine)*, 1957

Joan Mitchell returned to Paris in the summer of 1955 and began to divide her time between there and New York, swapping studios for several years with painter Paul Jenkins. Her friends were American artists Shirley Jaffe, Norman Bluhm, Kimber Smith and Sam Francis, and she met French-Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle, with whom she soon began a long-term relationship.

The 1957 painting *Untitled (La Fontaine)* was painted in France and was not exhibited during her lifetime. It bears an inscription atypically penned directly on the surface of the painting – *Le Laboureur et ses enfants, La Fontaine!!* – a poem about pastoral life that Van Gogh quoted in its entirety in a letter to his brother Theo. Along with Cezanne and Matisse, Van Gogh inhabits Mitchell’s pantheon of inspiration found in the great collection of late nineteenth and early twentieth century art at the Art Institute of Chicago that emboldened her ambition to paint. *Untitled (La Fontaine)* is solid yet unstable, deep rather than bright, asymmetrical and dramatically gestural in a way that relates to the boldly cantilevered compositions that de Kooning and Kline were showing back in New York.



Joan Mitchell, Paris, 1956

In both her Paris and New York studios, Mitchell continued to work on sections of primed linen stapled directly to the wall. She preferred to paint on a hard surface and rolling the unstretched paintings made them easier to move. A photograph of Mitchell surrounded by such works in the studio was included in a Life magazine photo essay titled “Women Artists in Ascendance” in 1957. Subjected though she was to the conventions of a glossy magazine photo shoot, her self-confidence was evident. That same year, Artnews published a much more significant article, “Mitchell Paints a Picture,” in which writer Irving Sandler and photographer Rudy Burckhardt created a vivid portrait of the artist.

As the Fifties drew to a close, Mitchell decided to stay in Paris with Riopelle and found the next important studio in her life on rue Fremicourt. *Untitled* 1959-60, may have been started in the prior studio and finished at Fremicourt, as it shows evidence of paint trails resulting from a change of orientation. There is a background layer of earthy browns, greens and violet, characteristic of certain 1959 paintings, over which rides a riot of intense color applied vigorously in stacks, bands and forceful gestures. The painting has an emotional intensity, not exactly new, but different, and represents a significant step in Mitchell’s work.



*Untitled*, c. 1959-60

Since Mitchell’s death in 1992, several exhibitions and publications have shed new light on the development of her work during the 1950s. She painted works both large and small that established a range of formal practices, honed her skills and clarified her goals. It is clear that the paintings she made during the decade were more diverse and more experimental than previously apparent.