



© Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève Photographe : Maurice Aeschimann

Joan Mitchell (1925-1992)

Untitled

1952-1953

Huile sur toile

Signé « J. Mitchell » en bas à droite

198 x 172.4 cm

FGA-BA-MITCH-0001

To admire *Untitled* by Joan Mitchell, art lovers will have to travel to Landerneau, in Finistère. A long trip for some perhaps, but rewarded with a chance to view an additional important loan from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art: *Hommage à Robert le diabolique (Tribute to Robert the Demon)* by Jean-Paul Riopelle. Both works are currently on display at the Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc pour la culture, which is hosting, until 22 April, an ambitious exhibition entitled *Mitchell - Riopelle, un couple dans la démesure (Mitchell - Riopelle, Nothing in Moderation)*.

The American Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) and the Canadian Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923-2002) met in Paris in 1955. They were to remain the tempestuous lovers of the abstract art world until they separated for good in 1979. The first room of the exhibition at the Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc pour la culture opens with the period preceding their encounter. Mitchell's *Untitled*, begun in 1952, and Riopelle's *Hommage à Robert le diabolique*¹, dated 1953, are shown together. This unprecedented face-to-face of the two works clearly reveals their equal attraction to abstraction and their very different ways of achieving it. The following displays highlight the "convergences and divergences that underlie the singular approach of each of these artists in the very special context of their shared lives"², according to Michel Martin, curator of the exhibition.

Though most of Joan Mitchell's early works have been preserved, they remain relatively unknown. This observation concerns paintings produced before 1959, the year the artist settled permanently in France. It was in Paris and then in Vétheuil, where Joan Mitchell purchased a house-studio in 1968, that she painted the large solar landscapes that won her international fame. In presenting several examples of paintings prior to the French period, the exhibition at Landerneau demonstrates how Joan Mitchell's American and especially her New York roots were essential to the later full development of her art.

*Untitled*³, exhibited for the first time in New York at the Stable Gallery in April 1953⁴, eloquently illustrates this American-French connection. At the time, Joan Mitchell, who had just turned 28, was securing her first solo shows in New York. A golden opportunity for her which confirmed the critical success of the previous year, marked by the young painter's historic participation in the famous *Ninth Street Show*⁵. This exhibition, curated by Leo Castelli, brought together 61 artists chosen from the most avant-garde of the time. The works of two generations of painters and sculptors were put on public display together for the very first time. Local and then international critics were not slow to identify, under the common denominator of the New York School, the artists who participated in this ground-

¹ *Hommage à Robert le diabolique (Tribute to Robert the Demon)*, oil on canvas, 200 x 282 cm, acquired by the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art in 2010 (FGA-BA-RIOPE-0003).

² Translated from the press release.

³ *Untitled*, oil on canvas (182.8 x 172.4 cm) acquired by the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art in 2011 (FGA-BA-MITCH-0001).

⁴ *Joan Mitchell*, Stable Gallery, New York, 07.04 – 25.04.1953. The Fondation Gandur pour l'Art thanks Laura Morris, Director of Archives and Research at the Joan Mitchell Foundation, for providing this significant information.

⁵ *Ninth Street Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings and Sculptures*, 60 East 9th Street, New York, 21.05 – 10.06.1951.

breaking event. The show benefitted from the support of the very select Artists' Club⁶ that Joan Mitchell had joined shortly before. Alongside Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler, she was one of the few women admitted to this male temple of abstract expressionism, led at the time by Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. Through their pictorial innovations, these two charismatic figures were shaking up the New York art scene, in full ferment in the early 1950s.

From this period, Thomas B. Hess, influential publisher of the magazine *ARTnews*, recalls an enlightening memory of Joan Mitchell's participation in the *Ninth Street Show* in 1951, her first New York exhibition: "one of the Abstract Expressionist elders proclaimed ruefully that it had taken him eighteen years to get to where Joan Mitchell had arrived in as many months."⁷ A feeling of resentment heightened by the faculties of assimilation of Joan Mitchell, soon regarded as one of the most gifted artists of the "new wave" which grouped together, within the New York School, the so-called second generation of abstract expressionists. Unlike their predecessors, its members no longer needed to pave the way for action painting but could throw themselves headlong into it; a reality made possible by Jackson Pollock who had, in the words of Willem de Kooning, "broken the ice"⁸.

*Cross Section of a Bridge*⁹, the iconic painting from Joan Mitchell's early career in New York, is the result of this uninhibited attitude. It shows how the artist has managed to synthesize the expressionist legacy of Arshile Gorky and the physical power of Willem de Kooning's abstract canvases. After this brilliant *tour de force*, there followed a small group of paintings to which *Untitled* belongs, together with one held at the Joan Mitchell Foundation (New York), which is not on display in Landerneau, but was lent for the first stages of the Canadian exhibition¹⁰. The compositions of both paintings are less dense than previous ones. The colourful, agglomerating masses that saturated the space have now disappeared. They have given way to a network of lines, curves and hatching which, something new to Joan Mitchell's art, spin round independently on the canvas, that is, not subject to any form whatsoever.

Among other comparable works¹¹, that of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art is the most aerial. The mesh of coloured filaments animating its surface is the least dense of them all. It thus lets filter through more of the light reflected by the pale background of the

⁶ From its creation in 1949, the Artists' Club, or The Club, located at 39 East 8th Street, along with the Cedar Bar, was an important meeting place and hub of emulation for the New York avant-garde.

⁷ Thomas B. Hess, "Sensations of Landscape", in *New York*, 20 December 1976, p. 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ Joan Mitchell, *Cross Section of a Bridge*, 1951, oil on canvas, 202.6 x 304.2 cm, Osaka, Osaka City Museum of Art.

¹⁰ Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, c. 1952-1953, 162.6 x 154.4 cm, New York, Joan Mitchell Foundation, col. repr. in *Mitchell - Riopelle, un couple dans la démesure*, exhibition catalogue, Quebec, Toronto, Landerneau, 5 Continent Editions, Milan, 2017, p. 19.

¹¹ In addition to the two artworks exhibited at Landerneau, at least two others are painted in the same vein: *Untitled*, 1952, 200 x 187 cm, courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York, col. repr. in Michel Waldberg, *Joan Mitchell*, Éditions de la Différence, Paris, 1992, fig. 66, p. [65] and *Untitled*, 1952, 198 x 183 cm, col. repr. in Catherine Flohic, "Joan Mitchell", *Ninety Magazine*, n° 10, 1993, p. 6.

composition, painted in a palette of white and grey. This particularity gives the whole a sense of balance and lightness absent from other contemporaneous compositions. The range of colours, on the other hand, is identical. The mix of cool and warm colours causes a metallic grey and a peacock blue to clash with a carmine red and a putty-coloured orange in a single chromatic swirl. These coloured notes, quivering with energy, give rhythm to the artist's vigorous handwriting which became her trademark over time.

Robert Goldwater noted in 1960 that "Robustiousness is the typical tone of the New York paintings". While the spiritedly-painted *Untitled* definitely corroborates such an analysis, the subtle and refined nuances that characterize it confirm that the art of which Goldwater spoke, "is as often delicate as it is powerful, and indeed in the best work is both at once"¹² as is the case here.

The unique combination of boldness and sensuality that *Untitled* can pride itself on, like the other associated works mentioned here, is certainly what best distinguishes Joan Mitchell's painting of this period. It is also the mark of her female contribution to the physical and virile painting of the New York School, then still largely dominated by men.

Bertrand Dumas
Curator of the Fine Arts collection
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, March 2019

¹² Robert Goldwater, "Reflections on the New York School", *Quadrum*, n° 8, 1960, pp. 33-34.