

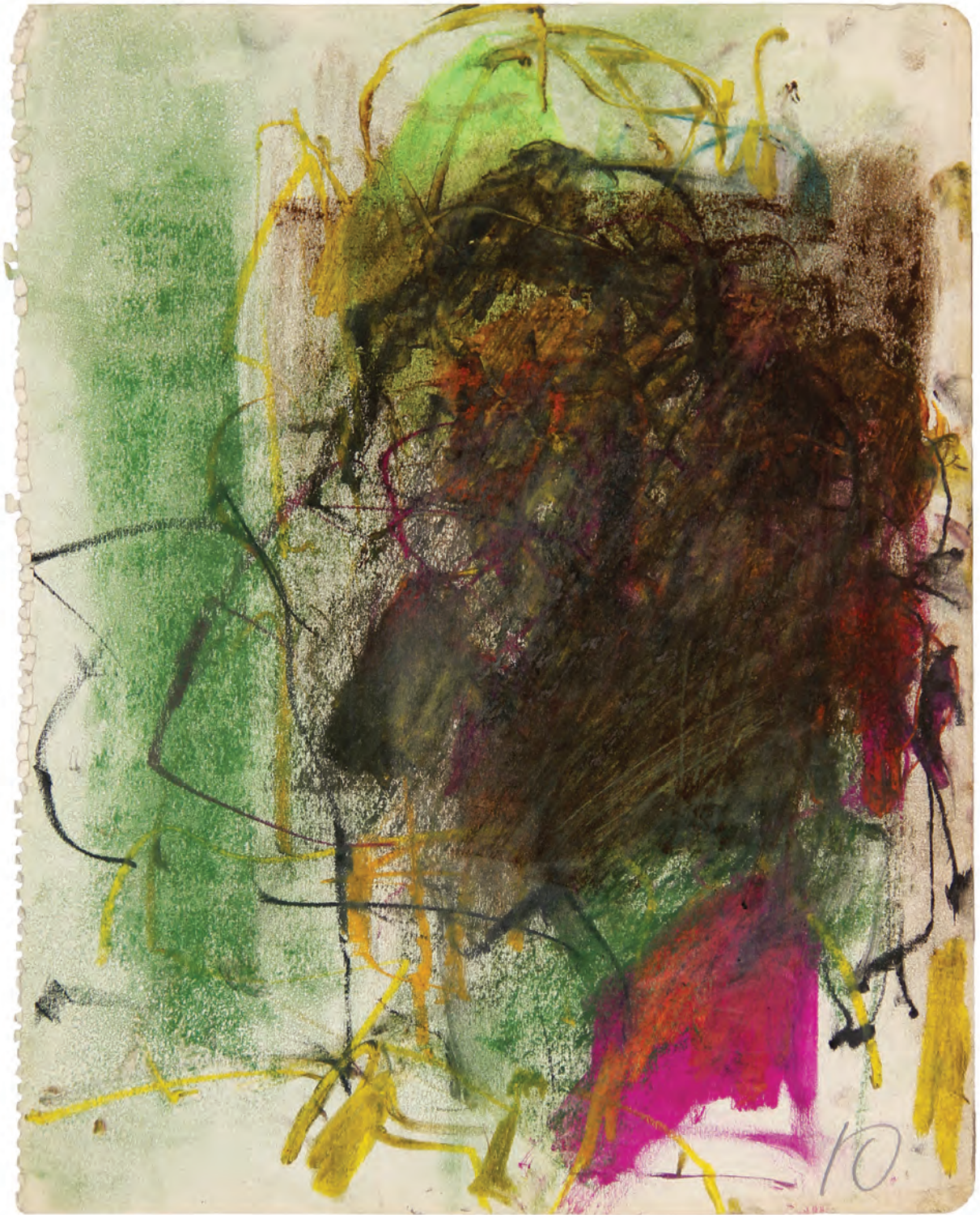


Joan Mitchell

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AND RELATED WORKS 1964–1967



1. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | pastel on paper, 13.5 x 11 inches, 34.29 x 27.94 cm.

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AND RELATED WORKS 1964–1967

ESSAY BY KAREN WILKIN

MAY 8–JUNE 28, 2014

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Introduction

In the spring of 1965, Joan Mitchell had her seventh and final exhibition at the historic Stable Gallery in New York where her career as a painter had been launched more than a decade earlier. Included in the exhibition were the first in a series of paintings that she described at the time as her “new black paintings, although there’s no black in any of them.” It would not have been known at the time, but these paintings had companion drawings, and those works on paper, never before exhibited, are at the heart of our presentation nearly a half century after they were made.

There is a series of small, bold works made on sketchbook sheets with a haze of charcoal covered with watercolor or oil. These are the closest in appearance to the “black” paintings, and like them, have no black to speak of. Larger and compositionally kindred is a series of charcoal drawings with flashes of sepia pastel on soft, textured handmade paper. Together, these are the “black drawings” for which this exhibition is titled. They are accompanied by two contemporaneous paintings that ask us to consider the dialogue between her primary medium of paint and the works on paper that generated so many advances in her evolution as an artist.

Mitchell generally spoke of her work in terms of feelings rather than their theoretical or structural aspects. The formal issue that did engage her was the relationship between figure and ground; never before had she addressed it so directly as in these mid-1960s works. We know from the titles of the related paintings that these compositions refer to trees, most specifically cypresses,

perhaps silhouetted against the sky in favorite places like Calvi and Girolata in Corsica that she visited during summers sailing on the Mediterranean with her companion, painter Jean Paul Riopelle, his daughters and a coterie of friends.

As she said at the time to poet John Ashbery who wrote an article about Mitchell's new work for *Artnews*: "I'm trying to remember what I *felt* about a certain cypress tree and I feel if I remember it, it will last me quite a long time." Van Gogh, whose paintings Mitchell passionately admired, made many paintings of cypress trees that are surely part of the ancestry of this body of work, as are Cezanne's planar descriptions of volumes and voids. It could be said that Mitchell was on her way to conceiving a pact between French Post Impressionism and American Abstract Expressionism that defines her work from this point forward and is a unique achievement in the history of 20th Century painting.

The exhibition also includes drawings made a few years later, in 1967, after she moved to a new home and studio in Vétheuil, a quintessentially French village northwest of Paris. These charcoals are suffused with more proximal references to nature, to foliage and vegetation. The associated paintings are drenched in color—new colors, different and more ripe than her earlier paintings—but these drawings stand as uniquely direct statements of the feelings she derived from immersion in her new environment.

All of these works are simultaneously austere and gorgeous, and are beautifully and sensitively drawn. They provide a revealing look at an important artist during a pivotal time of change, one that reads as a transition from the powerfully gestural Abstract Expressionist work of the 1950s and early 60s for which she was already celebrated, into a succession of later styles that begins in 1968 and extends to the end of her life in 1992. Amid the cohesion of Mitchell's entire body of work are special chapters, this is unmistakably one of them.

Jill Weinberg Adams



2. *Untitled*, c. 1964-65 | charcoal and pastel on paper, 24 x 18 inches, 60.96 x 45.72 cm.

To Be New; To Be Other

Joan Mitchell's reputation was established, in the 1950s, by her energetic, calligraphic paintings—tangles of apparently emotion-driven ribbons and slashes of color, intertwined with blacks and neutrals. In her biography of Mitchell, ironically titled "Lady Painter," Patricia Albers makes much of the artist's synesthesia, a neurological condition in which various kinds of sensory stimuli, most commonly letters or numbers, are experienced as colors. Mitchell's version of the phenomenon, Albers tells us, caused her to associate particular personalities with particular hues and to "see" sounds and emotions in color, all of which, the biographer suggests, was reflected in everything the artist did. Yet no matter how important chroma was to Mitchell, what might be called "drawing"—the generating gestures of the works with which she announced herself as a young artist to be taken seriously—remained fundamental to her conception of painting throughout her more than four-decade long career. Her canvases read as accretions of individual lines of many different weights almost before the hues of those inflected lines assert themselves. Mitchell is said to have been extremely interested, as an aspiring young painter, in Willem de Kooning's gestural approach, but her palimpsests of line seem to owe more to Jackson Pollock's webs of poured paint, with the important difference that, unlike Pollock's disembodied skeins, Mitchell's sinuous, athletic lines always make us intensely aware of the hand behind them. This awareness imbues even the most fragile marks on her canvases with notable physicality. Confronted by one of Mitchell's fraying expanses, we

think of the movements of the wrist and arm, and of the variations in pressure that produced those marks, in contrast to the way we experience the work of Mitchell's contemporary, Helen Frankenthaler, whose stains of radiant, thinned-out color seem to have come into being almost without the artist's tangible intervention, simply by being poured and then willed into place. Yet if the material presence of Mitchell's paintings engages us, we are held equally by the host of associations they provoke—associations with everything from feelings and states of mind to the phenomena of the world around us. Experience, visual and otherwise, has been transformed into highly charged gestures that, by virtue of reiteration, layering, and extension, become tenuously held-together "fields"—unraveling planes at once there and not there.

A painting, Mitchell implies, is both a manifestation of the artist's reactions to the appearance of things seen—places, qualities of light, times of day, seasons, weather, perhaps even people—and an embodiment of the emotion provoked by those perceptions, among other triggers, re-experienced in terms of the act of transferring responsive pigment to a flat surface with a responsive tool. Like her Abstract Expressionist forebears and like such members of her own generation as Michael Goldberg, Grace Hartigan, and the Québécois painter Jean Paul Riopelle, her partner for many years, Mitchell was convinced that the gestures with which artists manipulated materials were declarations of personality, as individual as a signature. At various times, especially in the last ten or twelve years of her life, her loosely woven sheets of gestures became more substantial and patchier, only to dissolve, at other times, into open networks of expressive strokes. Yet Mitchell's biographer's insistence on the importance of the artist's hyper-awareness of chroma may, it seems, not be misplaced. Mitchell's love of complex line, used as a kind of graph of feeling, never compromised her fascination with color. Even the notably dense canvases she referred to as "my black paintings," made in the mid-1960s, are full of color: strange greens and blues, the occasional flash of violet.

The so-called “black paintings” coincide with compelling works on paper, made about 1964 and 1965. They are little known, having remained, until now, unexhibited, in the file drawers of the artist’s studio, after her death. What may be the earliest drawings in the group, made on spiral-bound sketchbook sheets, with combinations of charcoal, oil, and watercolor, are small, but intense and revealing; a related series of mid-size charcoal and pastel drawings on handmade paper probably followed. Together, they both broaden and deepen our understanding of Mitchell in these years. While the “black paintings,” despite the artist’s characterization of them as embodiments of darkness, often read as relatively open, wind-blown, and full of flickering light, these works on paper seem generally brooding and inwardly focused. As a group, these drawings of about 1964 and 1965 offer insight, as well, into Mitchell’s working methods, by providing an intimate view of what seems to be a restless search to encapsulate feeling. Seeing them is like looking over the artist’s shoulder as she worked, like being made privy to her thought processes. She appears to have worked spontaneously and unsystematically on the series, moving along a fairly narrow, perhaps predetermined path, testing the potential of a fairly iconic, centralized composition, but approaching it freshly each time. There’s a strong family resemblance among the various drawings in both series, but there’s no suggestion that the issues proposed by each work have been addressed with any sense of familiarity.

Each appears to have begun with a scrawled configuration in the center of the page, a rapid gesture that, especially in the smaller works made about 1964, can seem driven more by feeling than by aesthetic considerations. We struggle to decipher these initial thoughts, since a wide variety of marks have been superimposed on them—broad swipes, insistently repeated strokes, and staccato flourishes—to form a clenched, centralized “cloud” that all-but cancels out what lies beneath. Some of these taut little images seem like metaphors for existential angst; the dark, obliterating

mass reads as a gesture of despair. But in others, in particular, the drawings probably made later, in 1965, the centralized cloud ceases to be an imposition; instead, it takes on its own life as a hovering, more benign presence, its weight and darkness pierced and enlivened by notes of reddish brown pastel. In these works, charcoal and pastel seem to have achieved parity, momentarily conspiring to come together for the greater good; the configuration is still clenched, a little angry, but some air has entered the space.

Those familiar with Mitchell's biography will point to events in her life about 1964 and 1965—her relationship with Riopelle, her approaching fortieth birthday, her father's death and mother's illness, and more, along with changing attitudes towards the Abstract Expressionist values demonstrated by her work—any of which could have triggered the sense of discontent reflected in the fierce emotional tone of the works on paper she made during these troubled years. It has been perceptively suggested, for example, that the small, emotionally loaded sketchbook drawings were made during summer sailing holidays spent with Riopelle and his children, in the south of France, when she was deprived of privacy and time in her studio.

The more lyrical mood, larger size, and more open structure of a group of charcoal drawings made in 1967 may be a response to a very different set of circumstances. That year, Mitchell acquired a home and studio in Vétheuil, northwest of Paris, a relatively unspoiled village where the Impressionists had painted. She would remain in this idyllic spot, near the Seine, until her death in 1992. Perhaps because of the new stimuli Mitchell experienced after moving from urban Paris to a more rural setting, the delicate, spreading haloes of tone, the emphatic lines, and floating shapes in the paper works she produced in 1967 are quite unlike the compressed, confrontational masses that dominate her drawings of 1964 and 1965. The striking variety of these works prefigures motifs that Mitchell would explore in subsequent paintings, canvases in which her Abstract Expressionist-inflected gestures

often coalesce into unstable shapes whose saturated color and cursive rhythms seem to allude obliquely but powerfully to the world of nature. They are far from landscape-like, in terms of their space and structure, but leaves seen against sunlight, plant forms, the upward thrust of trees, and other “vegetal” motifs haunt these images.

A related vocabulary of shapes, smudges, and delicate touches informs a small group of drawings on vellum, made in 1967 in preparation for a lithograph included in a portfolio, *In Memory of My Feelings*, published by the Museum of Modern Art to honor the poet and curator Frank O’Hara. A close friend and a supporter of Mitchell’s art, O’Hara had been killed the previous year in an accident on Fire Island. The portfolio included thirty of O’Hara’s lean, conversational poems illustrated by the artists who had been his friends and admirers, an impressive list that included, in addition to Mitchell, Joe Brainard, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Philip Guston, Jasper Johns, Alex Katz, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, and Larry Rivers, among others. O’Hara’s never wrote a poem directly about his friend Mitchell, as he did about others of their circle, most notably Michael Goldberg, in the celebrated *Why I Am Not a Painter*. The promisingly titled *Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s* was written in honor of the painter Jane Freilicher’s marriage to Joe Hazen, in 1957, and read at a celebration for the couple—“and Joan was surprising you with a party for which I was the decoy.” Yet it contains a line that could apply to Mitchell herself: “the effort to be new does not upset you nor the effort to be other”. Mitchell’s own tribute to O’Hara, like the remarkable group of works on paper of the mid-1960s that it relates to, could be described in the same way. These intimate, intensely personal drawings seem effortless and they are both new and other, in the best possible way.

Karen Wilkin
New York, April 2014



3. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.



4. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.



5. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.



6. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.

7. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | oil on canvas, 63.75 x 44.75 inches, 161.93 x 113.67 cm.





8. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal, oil and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.



9. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | oil on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.



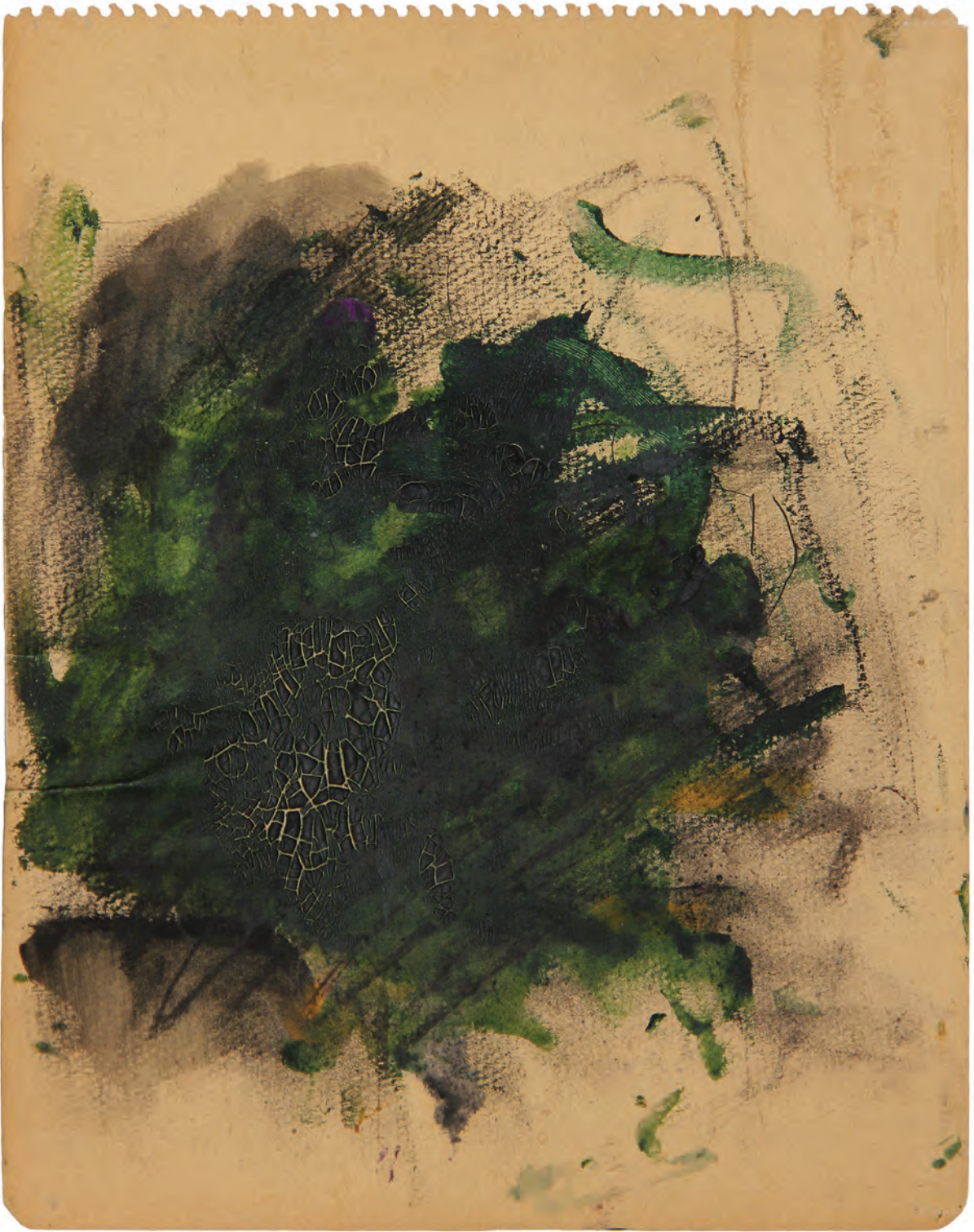
10. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal, oil and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.



11. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal and watercolor on paper, 12.875 x 10.325 inches, 32.7 x 26.3 cm.



12. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal, oil and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.



13. *Untitled*, c. 1964 | charcoal, oil and watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 inches, 26.67 x 20.96 cm.





15. *Untitled*, c. 1964-65 | charcoal and pastel on paper, 24 x 18 inches, 60.96 x 45.72 cm.



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22. *Untitled*, c. 1964-65 | charcoal and pastel on paper, 24 x 18 inches, 60.96 x 45.72 cm.















29. *Untitled*, 1967 | charcoal on vellum, 14 x 11 inches, 35.56 x 27.94 cm.



30. *Untitled*, 1967 | charcoal and pastel on vellum, 14 x 11 inches, 35.56 x 27.94 cm.



31. *Untitled*, 1967 | charcoal on vellum, 14 x 11 inches, 35.56 x 27.94 cm.



32. *Untitled*, 1967 | charcoal and pastel on vellum, 14 x 11 inches, 35.56 x 27.94 cm.



33. *Untitled*, c. 1967 | watercolor on paper, 16 x 13 inches, 40.64 x 33.02 cm.

We are grateful to the owners of these works for their support of this exhibition, one that raises almost as many questions as it answers. We thank the Joan Mitchell Foundation, particularly archivist Laura Morris, for sharing historical information and resources that are a vital part of the process of answering those questions and raising yet new ones. The organizational and editing skills of gallery director Mary Benyo have been indispensable to the exhibition and accompanying catalogue, in addition to her insights about the works themselves.

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Typography by Ink, Inc.
Printed by Puritan Capital.
ISBN 978-1-4951-1018-4



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