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Joan Mitchell

The Black Drawings and Related Works 1964 – 1967

May 8 – June 28, 2014

Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday 10am – 6pm



Untitled, c.1964, 8-1/4 x 10-1/2",
charcoal, watercolor, and oil on paper



Untitled, 1964, 63-3/4 x 51-1/8",
oil on canvas

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.



Untitled, c.1964-65, 24 x 18"
charcoal and pastel on paper



Untitled, 1967, 36 x 24",
charcoal on paper

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 1960s 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.

For additional information, please contact Mary Benyo at 212-941-0012 or mary@lennonweinberg.com.