Joan Mitchell

Edited by Sarah Roberts and Katy Siegel

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Untitled, 1969

Mara Hoberman

Untitled (1969) is illustrated in full as plate 70.

FIG 6.7 **Joan Mitchell**
Untitled, 1969 (detail). Oil on canvas, 102⅛ × 184⅛ in. (260.4 × 468.6 cm). Musée de Brou, Bourg-en-Bresse, France

FIG 6.8 Joan Mitchell in the garden at La Tour, Vétheuil, France, 1972

With sunflowers growing in her garden and Vincent van Gogh's golden-hued paintings ever blooming in her mind, Mitchell began referring to some of her own works as "sunflowers" as early as 1968. Just as van Gogh's decampment in 1888 to the "yellow house" in Arles compelled him to paint "nothing but large sunflowers,"[1] Mitchell's move to Vétheuil in 1968 precipitated a pivotal *Sunflower* series. During the prolific year that followed, Mitchell painted a suite of large-format, single-panel works that she titled *Sunflower I–VI*, as well as more than a dozen other paintings of varying sizes and formats that, though not titled as such, feature the same evocative explosions of yellow and orange paint.

In contrast to Mitchell's more typical densely painted landscapes, her 1969 sunflowers are relatively stark compositions featuring isolated blossoms. Throughout these works, the artist repeats halos of golden petals surrounding roughly circular dark-red forms that represent the flowers' large, disklike centers, varying their configurations to evoke different stages of floral bloom and wilt. Deceptively spare, the paintings' distinctive pale backgrounds are, in fact, a complex blend of thick white paint subtly tinged with the same colors used to depict the sunflowers themselves, a commingling of chromatic and conceptual sophistication that gives the areas surrounding the sunflowers the appearance of being haunted by ghostly afterimages of blossoms past. Comprising buds, blooms, droops, and memories, Mitchell's still lifes flout the genre's traditional frozen perspective in favor of one that thrums with the living energy of phases and cycles.

Plate 70 is one of many untitled sunflowers that Mitchell painted in 1969 and is a rare multipanel masterpiece in this style. If the religious connotations of the painting's triptych format are heightened by its current home—a fifteenth-century French monastery (where it hangs as part of the Musée de Brou collection)—more striking still is how Mitchell uses the three panels to describe temporal and ephemeral effects.

The central panel boasts a substantial blossom whose magnificent orange-flecked yellow corona surrounds a crimson heart accented with dabs of vibrant green. The flower's gravity-defying petals seem to explode toward the edges of the canvas, their momentum given mass by Mitchell's thick impasto, which appears to strain away from the picture plane. This vibrant (and nearly three-dimensional) flower head is supported by a hearty stem, which Mitchell represents as a thicket of mostly green dabs and strokes embellished with flourishes of yellow, blue, red, and orange (fig. 6.7).

The painting's side panels are considerably less resplendent by comparison, recalling the humble kneeling patrons flanking a coronation or annunciation scene in Renaissance triptychs. Chromatically and materially less intense, the peripheral blossoms seem to be fading and falling, drifting down toward the bottom of the composition. This effect is further emphasized by Mitchell's use of thinner paints, which causes curls of familiar colors—yellows, oranges, blues, and greens—to trail long, watery drips. Writing for the French weekly *L'Express* in 1975, Pierre Schneider attributed the "miracle" of Mitchell's flowers (which he admiringly compared to Édouard Manet's peonies) to the way in which they "disintegrate into a chaos of pigments."[2] Indeed, Mitchell's ability to conflate the materiality of her medium with that of her subject is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in her early sunflowers. Modulating the heft and opacity of her paint and varying her application from punchy dabs that pull the medium away from the canvas to smooth swipes that push it into the surface, Mitchell simulates (as opposed to merely illustrates) an evanescent life force and a tangible process of decomposition. Thick impasto suggesting magma-like eruptions of light, heat, and mass is counterbalanced by calligraphic strokes of crimson and cerulean that flutter, as if weightless, across the canvas.

Once Mitchell began painting sunflowers, she never stopped. "Sunflowers are something I feel very intensely," she said in 1986, nearly two decades after inaugurating her first *Sunflower* series. "They look so wonderful when young, and they are so very moving when they are dying. I don't like fields of sunflowers. I like them alone, or, of course, painted by van Gogh" (fig. 6.8).[3] Indeed, Mitchell would return periodically to the motif as a means of self-reflection throughout her career, inflecting each iteration with mood and season. Compared to her later sunflowers, particularly the wilting ones she painted in 1990–91 (plate 123), near the end of her life Mitchell's 1969 sunflowers are optimistic—euphoric, even—self-affirmations that helped advance her career on its own resolute and distinct path. As art historian Barbara Rose put it, Mitchell "spent the sixties and seventies literally cultivating her own garden and emerged from, if not isolation, then separation from the New York art scene as one of the strongest and most independent artists in the world."[4] Fruits of this intense period of cultivation, including *Sunflower I–VI*, were presented in the artist's first major museum exhibition, in 1972, at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York. Reviewing this seminal show for the *New York Times*, Peter Schjeldahl lamented Mitchell's underrated status since the 1950s, describing her as "a most important victim of sixties taste," yet confidently predicted that she would ultimately be recognized "as one of the best American painters not only of the fifties, but of the sixties and seventies as well."[5] Realized at the end of a decade both tumultuous and empowering—marked by the loss of both parents; the purchase of and subsequent relocation to La Tour, her Vétheuil estate; and debut solo shows with Jean Fournier and Martha Jackson—Mitchell's glorious 1969 sunflowers reflect the artist herself in peak bloom.

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COVER: Joan Mitchell, *Sans Pierre,* 1969 (detail). Oil on canvas, 102½ × 78½ in. (260.4 × 199.4 cm). Collection of The Long View Legacy LLC. Artwork © Estate of Joan Mitchell. Photo: Lee Stalsworth, courtesy the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. See plate 89. PAGE 1: Letter from Joan Mitchell to Joyce Pensato, July 14, 1981. Courtesy the Estate of Joyce Pensato. PAGE 2: Joan Mitchell, 1954. Joan Mitchell Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Walt Silver. PAGES 6–7: Joan Mitchell at La Tour, Vétheuil, France, 1984. Joan Mitchell Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Édouard Boubat. © Estate of Édouard Boubat. PAGES 10–11: Iva in front of *Garden for Audrey* (1975) in Joan Mitchell's studio at La Tour, Vétheuil, France, 1975. Joan Mitchell Foundation Archives, New York. PAGE 13: Joan Mitchell at La Tour, Vétheuil, France, 1991. Photo: David Turnley / Corbis / VCG via Getty Images. PAGE 338: Joan Mitchell in her studio at La Tour, Vétheuil, France, 1984. Joan Mitchell Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Édouard Boubat. © Estate of Édouard Boubat. PAGES 368–69: Joan Mitchell in her studio at 10 rue Frémicourt, Paris, 1962. Photo: Jean-Pierre Biot / Paris Match via Getty Images. PAGE 370: Joan Mitchell, 1981. Photo: Hans Namuth. © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate, courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. PAGES 376–77: Mitchell on the balcony at La Tour, Vétheuil, France, 1991. Photo: Christopher Campbell.