Joan Mitchell is a painter who hates esthetic labels. She agrees with Harry Holtzman that “the hardening of the categories causes art disease.” She finds particularly distasteful moral insinuations concerning “good” versus “bad” criteria, and insists that “there is no one way to paint; there is no single answer.” Miss Mitchell is reticent to talk about painting, so in order to approach the underlying processes in her work, the Socratic method was needed, rejecting some classifications, modifying or keeping others. The catchphrase to which she objected least was “New York School,” and she readily admitted membership in that non-academy. Unlike some of the younger artists who have reacted away from the elders of Abstract-Expression-
ism, she sees herself as a "conservative," although her pictures can hardly be described as hidebound. She not only appreciates the early struggles of the older painters, whose efforts expedited acceptance for those following them, but finds a number of qualities in their work that have a profound meaning for her.

Those elements in New York painting to which she responds are difficult to isolate. They have little to do with technique, for although Miss Mitchell has assimilated some of the methods of Gorky, de Kooning, Kline, et al., she couldn’t pretend to know how they make their pictures. More significant is a feeling of familiarity she experiences when she looks at their work, specifically, a kindred involvement with space.

Her concern with space is rooted in the impact of the city. "I am up against a wall looking for a view. If I looked out of my window, what would I paint?" She lives on the fourth floor of a lower East Side walk-up. Miss Mitchell has to remember her landscapes; "I carry my landscapes around with me." They become the windows in her house; as Baudelaire wrote: "A man who looks out of an open window never sees as much as a man who looks out of a closed one."

The painting which Miss Mitchell started for this article was called Bridge [Figs. 5, 6]. She titles pictures only at the request of galleries, reviewers and friends. This work was discarded, and another was begun and completed. She jokingly named this painting George Swimming at Barnes Hole, but It Got too Cold. In both works, a recollected landscape provided the initial impulse, but the representational image was transformed in the artist’s imagination by feelings inspired by bridge and beach; in the one, sensations of girders and height and the varied meanings implicit in “spanning a void;” and in the other, thoughts of George, a dog she once owned, and a memorable summer day spent swimming in East Hampton, Long Island.

Those feelings which she strives to express she defines as “the qualities which differentiate a line of poetry from a line of prose.” However, emotion must have an outside reference, and nature furnishes the external substance in her work. When asked what she felt about the word “nature,” she replied: "I hate it. It reminds me of some Nature-Lover Going Out Bird-Watching.” She dislikes compulsive attitudes toward nature, which for her has a simple meaning and beauty, “I feel like a little child coming up out of the basement and saying; who put the sidewalk there, who put the tree there?” Nature—country and city—is that which is outside of her; it is the theater in which she lives, her decor. In this sense Miss Mitchell does not like Non-Objective art: "what is so interesting about a square, circle and triangle?"

But if nature supplies the raw material, the artist then sifts it through memory to convert it into the essential matter of her art. But not all remembered scenes are equally significant. There are those fleeting moments, those “almost supernatural states of soul,” as Baudelaire called them, during which “the profundity of life is entirely revealed in any scene, however ordinary, that presents itself before one. The scene becomes its symbol.” Miss Mitchell attempts to paint this sign, to re-create both the recalled landscape and the frame of mind she was in originally. Memory, as a storehouse of indelible images, becomes her creative domain.

However, a “state of soul” is indefinite, and cognition of the total “profundity of life,” unattainable. Still, if sparks of these are experienced, a yearning so poignant arises, so superior to what is accessible, that it can only be called “joy,” in C. S. Lewis’ sense of the word. The most complete satisfaction is achieved, not in the realization of the possible, but in the most intense desire for the illimitable. The lack of yearning for any length of time causes an inquietude and despondency, a sedulous longing for the yearning. Miss Mitchell paints to reawaken this desire. Her bridge, lake or beach must transcend the finite (what can be seen) and partake in some of the Infinite, expressing its paradoxes and ambiguity. This is the “something more” that she means when she says: “The painting has to work, but it has to say something more than that the painting works.” In such transformations, the bridge leads to the Gates of Paradise, and the beach rings a lake in the Garden of Eden, the instant before the Fall.

The expression of remembered joy has priority over the painting process. The artist tries to forget herself while working. “I want to make myself available to myself. The moment that I am self-conscious, I cease painting. When I think of how I am doing it, I’ve been bored for some time, and I stop. I hate just

Like many members of the avant-garde New York School of abstractionists, Joan Mitchell often works on over-size canvases, so there must be room in her studio 1 to keep the painting at a distance. Large amounts of pigment are kept readily available in tins and on palettes 2. Working over a rough charcoal sketch of the structure, she attacks the canvas with brushes 3, 8, her fingers and sometimes rags.
to fill in spots to cover a painting, and if I do so, it's only because Lewitin once told me that the canvas would rot if it were not covered." Yet spontaneity does not mean absence of craft. She would like to have her technique sufficiently at her fingertips, so that "the commands of the mind may never be distorted by the hesitations of the hand" (Baudelaire).

The artist chose to paint *Bridge*, because the image was a favorite. In a sense it is a synthetic symbol; she was born in Chicago near Lake Michigan, and the impress of city and water are central in her work. Moreover, she wanted to explore further a technical problem which developed in a recently completed diptych and in *Harbor, December*. In the latter picture, she experimented with color areas, but as yet, these "painty" sections were not as accurate as her whiplash lines.

*Bridge* was begun directly on an unstretched linen canvas 90 inches high by 80 inches wide, and stapled to her studio wall. She sketched in charcoal a central horizontal stroke about which she composed an over-all linear structure. Turning ab-
The first painting begun for this article, Bridge 5, 6 was abandoned because “the feeling was not specific enough” an image of the memory of nature that gave the work its initial impetus. A second painting, based on the Long Island landscape, and a day at the beach when the artist’s dog, George, went swimming, was started 7, 8. As the blues began to predominate, the summery feeling “Got too Cold” 9.

most immediately to tube paints, she attacked the chalked areas with housepainters’ and artists’ brushes, her fingers and, occasionally, rags [figs. 3, 4]. Although the original composition is important to her, she worked rapidly. A full range of color was used, dull oranges and dark blue-blacks predominating [fig. 5].

The picture was allowed to sit for a day. The artist resumed painting the next evening and worked through the night. “I prefer daylight, but I also like to work at night.” She painted slowly, studying the canvas from the furthest point in the studio (25 feet away), simulating in a way the panoramic view of memory. She spends a great deal of time looking at her work. “I paint from a distance. I decide what I am going to do from a distance. The freedom in my work is quite controlled. I don’t close my eyes and hope for the best. If I can get into the act of painting, and be free in the [Continued on page 69]
sures of the National Gallery are arranged in two sections, with the
first twenty rooms given to works from the thirteenth to the sixteenth
century, and containing the original Farnese collection; and the
rest of the forty-five rooms devoted to masters of the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries. A neat bar and lounge, halfway through
the sequence of rooms, offers a convenient resting place, and from here a
stairway leads to a panoramic terrace on the roof of the palace. The
view is spectacular, embracing Naples, its bay, with Capri and Ischia
in the background, and Vesuvius and the Sorrentine coast to the left.
The three rooms leading to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century section
show rotating exhibitions of drawings from the museum's
large collection. Two grandiose cartoons (with pounce marks),
Michelangelo's for the three soldiers in the Crucifixion of St. Peter
fresco of the Pauline Chapel at the Vatican, and Raphael's for the
Moses of his second Vatican Stanza, are exhibited here.

The most sumptuous of the rooms is lined with green silk and
floored with slabs cut from an ancient block of African marble,
mottled deep red and white, found in the Roman forum; it contains
nine Titans [p. 68].

The grandiose piano nobile, or first floor of the palace, houses
besides the extensive galleries of nineteenth-century Neapolitan art,
the collections of porcelain and Renaissance bronzes and medals
and the armory of ancient weapons (after the one in Turin, the
best in Italy), a simplified reconstruction of a royal suite of the
late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As in the Pinacoteca,
la pièce-de-résistance of the suite, a small room entirely walled
in porcelain, [fig. 8] has a history of peregrination. The Rococo
revelation, with chinoiserie plaques and birds, monkeys, flowers
and fruit perched on or turned around its ornate moldings, was a gift
from Charles III to his wife Maria Amalia, and was executed at the
Capodimonte porcelain factory in 1757-59, when it was installed
in the royal residence of Portici, south of Naples. In 1866 the walls
were moved to Capodimonte, but the vaulted plaster ceiling, by
the same hands as the porcelain decoration, was left behind. It has now
been brought to Capodimonte and reunited with its walls, whose
three-thousand pieces have been cleaned and remounted. The rarity
of this eighteenth-century extravagance of interior decoration justifies
the immense labor that has gone into restoring and reconstituting
its parts, including the elaborately playful porcelain chandelier,
which had been reduced to a heap of minute fragments, filling two
crates, by the air bombardments of 1943. The effect made by the
porcelain room, the ballroom, the dining room and the rest of the
royal suite is less overpowering than that of the background in a
technicolor period movie of courtly high life, but much more con-
vincing than that of the usual royal apartments, all over the Conti-
nent, whose shabby grandeur may call up dull historic echoes but
offers little pleasure to the eye. Discreetly cleaned and refurbished,
with upholstery and draperies reweven after their original patterns,
Capodimonte's royal rooms are probably the most attractive in
Europe today, while its complex of museums is certainly among the
most richly endowed in works of art, the best equipped and the
most pleasingly arranged.

Mitchell paints a picture continued from page 47

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forced herself to paint, but what? Miss Mitchel needs a subject she
likes in order to feel positively ought to to work. A friend jokingly
suggested that she paint a poodle she once had swimming. The dog,
George, became the anemone catalyst which provided the remem-
bered attitude, and the beach in East Hampton furnished the remem-
bered landscape image, although once the painting was started, it
took over.

George Swimming at Barnes Hole began as a lambent yellow paint-
ing, (fig. 7), but during the second all-night session, the work
changed. The lustrous yellows turned to opalescent whites, and the feel-
ing became bleak; therefore, "but It Got Too Cold!" The artist did
not carry her buoyancy any further; the beach was transposed from
summer to fall. It seemed as if the hurricane that struck East Ham-
ton in the autumn of 1954 invaded the picture. Since her early child-
hood, lake storms have been a frightening symbol both of devastat-
tion and attraction, and the sense of tempestuous waters appears
frequently in her work. Miss Mitchell painted four hurricane canvases
based on this experience in 1954. George is a return to this series, the
realization of what was attempted then. This picture is less linear than
her work in the intervening years. The contrast of the happy heat of
the multicolored central image, the shimmering water and the sun-
streaked atmosphere with the fearful suggestion of the impending
hurricane creates a remarkably subtle tension.

The artist stretched the finished canvas, which measured 86 by 78
inches, without trimming any away, and decided to include it in her
show at the Stable gallery that spring (A.L., Mar. '57). She liked
George, but felt that it still lacked a certain structure and an "ac-
curacy in intensity." When asked about her personal meanings in
this work and their communication, she answered: "If a painting
comes from them, then they don't matter. Other people don't have to
see what I do in my work." As time goes on, past pictures become in-
creasingly remote, and Joan Mitchell tends to see them as others do,
as paintings. The vital matter is transferred to works in progress.

Amateur standing

Proportion and distortion

A difficult problem for students to master is the adjusting of forms
to a correct proportion and placement within the limited picture
space. As discussed in this column last month, the primitives, like
children, are not basically concerned with such problems, for they
"write" their pictures naturally on a flat surface, which they move
or less take for granted. Whatever illusion of reality is to be found in
their art is suggested by the imagination. But as artists become more
and more objective about life they become less satisfied with implica-
tion, and search for devices to create the illusion of reality. Thus
perspective was born.

For clarification and convenience, we may roughly assemble the
devices used by artists to create the illusion of existing forms on a
flat surface into three areas: (a) psychological—which includes the
symbolic and the metaphysical; (b) scientific perspective—or the
quest for objectivity; (c) the formal—modern design and space
principles.

In the first category is included most early and religious art, which
relies heavily upon metaphor and symbol. This art disregards natural
proportions and readily distorts anatomy for symbolic purposes. The
Egyptians, for instance, portrayed their gods and kings larger than
life in the heroic proportions befitting them, and shot the more
"normal" proportions for lesser beings. The Byzantines also related
size and proportions to status. Equivalent procedures persist today
among the self-taught, and also with many modern, disciplined artists,
who find such means better suited to express their ideas. It is inter-
esting to observe how deities shrink in scale as "reality" and Human-
ism take over, as in the Renaissance, where the human figure domi-
nates the canvas.

Comparatively, perspective (category b) allows no such freedom.
A fortunately preserved preliminary study made by Leonardo da Vinci
for his Adoration of the Magi shows how carefully the Renaissance
masters planned their picture-space as ruled by the mathematics of
one-point perspective. Their forms were also "distorted" but for dif-
f erent purposes. They were made large or small as demanded by their
placement within the perspective framework, with lines (of buildings,
for instance) converging to meet the demands of what was then
thought to be an inflexible visual law. Size now is not decided by
hierarchical status or social caste but by an impersonal law, the
mechanical perspective system.

In the third category (c), forms are also distorted, but now to fit
and fill areas preconditioned by a planned design and space upon the