



Joan Mitchell

JOAN MITCHELL, *Sunflowers*

1990-91, oil on canvas diptych

102 1/4 x 157 1/2 inches

Joan Mitchell

Joan Mitchell was born in Chicago in 1925 and earned a BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1947. In the early 1950's she participated in the vibrant downtown New York art scene and spent time with many other painters and poets. It was during this time in New York that she began to paint in a way known as abstract expressionism.

In 1955, she moved to the city of Paris, France and in 1967, from the city to a house in a small town near Paris called Vétheuil.

At Vétheuil she had more space to paint and was surrounded by nature. Her house sat up on a hill overlooking the River Seine. The property had many big trees and high gardens in which she grew all kinds of plants and flowers, among them sunflowers which she loved in particular. The companionship of her dogs was very important to Joan; she owned many throughout her life and their names can often be found in the titles of her paintings.

Joan Mitchell painted throughout her entire life. In addition to oil paintings, she made drawings, especially with pastels and watercolors, and did several different kinds of printmaking. She died in 1992.



Vétheuil, 1972. Photo Nancy Crampton

Her work & *Sunflowers*

The titles of Joan Mitchell's works, attributed after a painting was complete, can be seen as an indication of the kinds of feelings and remembered experiences Mitchell was working with while she painted. Throughout her life she referred to sunflowers in her paintings; she said of them, "[they] are like people to me."

The bloom of the sunflower has a particularly concentrated mass. Pushed upward on tall, spindly stalks, it blossoms, droops, falls apart and fades. Mitchell's late sunflower paintings reflect the feeling of the flower's life cycle: its immense gathering of energy into the brightly colored flower and its subsequent dissipation.

In *Sunflowers*, brushstrokes collect in spherical forms, which seem to pull paint from the white spaces of the canvas. These entwined bundles of paint and space convey the sense of matter held together by the tension between attraction and dissolution. Paint scatters and collects, gathers and expands, allowing the forms in *Sunflowers* to breathe.

In her late works, Mitchell presents us with a kind of certainty regarding paint, color, form and balance that is also a corporeal certainty – that in life and nature, contrasting entities and forces both contradict and agree, and can, through the medium of paint, unify. Ultimately, Mitchell is celebrating and expressing gratitude for the sunflower.



Vétheuil, 1984. Photo Édouard Boubat

Medium & Technique

Oil paint is made of pigments – substances, often dry powders, that have rich, strong color – mixed with vegetable oils. This mixture creates a paint that glides

smoothly across a surface, and can be applied quickly. Depending upon the relative dryness of paint beneath each new mark, colors will layer over one another, or mix to form a new color. Each mark in *Sunflowers* was made quickly and confidently, however, each was carefully planned in order to create diverse but harmonious bursts of color, echoing the energetic growth of the sunflower.



New York, 1957. Photo Rudolph Burckhardt

Questions for discussion

1. What do you think Joan Mitchell meant when she said that sunflowers were like people to her?
2. What are some opposites and contradictions that you can think of? How might you represent them in separate artworks? How might you represent their coexistence?
3. Consider the life cycle of the sunflower. How does Mitchell convey this cycle in the structure of *Sunflowers*?
4. How does this painting celebrate the existence of sunflowers?