

Reframing Joan Mitchell: Feeling, Memory, and Abstract Impressionism

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Joan Mitchell, *Lyric*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 68 x 72 3/4 inches (172.72 x 184.785 cm).

Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) defied labels throughout her career. Often identified as a “second-generation” Abstract Expressionist painter, Mitchell engaged with the New York School in the 1950s while developing her style of painting rooted in what she ambiguously defined as “memories and feelings of landscape.” Mitchell’s career has only recently reemerged in the public eye. Little attention has been paid to understanding the function of lived experiences- memories and feelings- as conduits for her motivation to paint, and no critical discourse has fully examined why her career rose to critical acclaim in 1955 yet was neglected during the 1960s. Mitchell’s paintings shifting between representation and abstraction showcase a nuanced understanding of the varying bounds of feeling and memory, revealing an artist with a keen perception of the human condition, of the ability to poignantly elicit emotion through her evolved visual language.

What does it mean to paint a feeling?

Mitchell’s artistic prowess can be located in her ability to articulate experiences of memory in an ebb and flow of representation and abstraction; by not confining herself strictly to either abstraction or representation, she expressed emotion through a stylistic fluidity, through her shifting between these registers. Her formal devices of framing the canvas yet enabling her strokes to run freely within its confines again showcase the necessity of duality to this flux of her rendering of “feelings.” From 1955 on, although she asserted that she only painted “memories of feelings of landscape,” her abstract paintings retained connections to the representational world.



Joan Mitchell, *Hemlock*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 91 x 80 inches (231.14 x 203.2 cm).



Joan Mitchell, *Hudson River Day Line*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 79 x 83 inches (200.66 x 210.82 cm)



Joan Mitchell, *Sunflower*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 102 x 70 1/2 inches (259.08 x 179.07 cm)

Through an Abstract Impressionist Lens

Mitchell prolonged the Abstract Impressionist moment of 1955-58 into the 1960s by advancing her recollection of landscape through impressions and memories hinging upon effects and perceptions of light, color, air, and space. Since critics and curators had difficulty positioning and defining Mitchell’s art, such an analysis of the artist reveals the current necessity for scholarship to reevaluate her as an artist in her own right; her technique of painting emotions and past experiences in the remembrance of landscapes results in her standing out markedly from her contemporaries. Her insistence upon memory may therefore best be considered as her proper “landscape of memories”- a landscape of feelings generated within the individual and transferred to canvas. Her “abstracted representations” and “representational abstractions” signal the building of experience and augment the significance of the additive process of her work. Through her formal features and beliefs on the relationship between feeling and memory to painting, she reflected on her world, on her “landscape,” in a less restrictive way.