1 Joan Mitchell in her studio in downtown New York.

By Irving Sandler

Photographs by Rudolph Burckhardt

Mitchell

paints a picture

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-

2 The artist's palette.

3 A broad stroke is applied with brush at arm's length.

4 Detail reveals the thin but complex texture.

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.

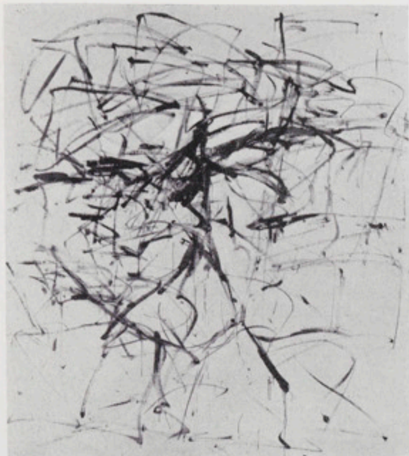
Those feelings which she strives to express she defines as "the qualities which differentiate a line of poetry from a line of prose." However, emotion must have an outside reference, and nature furnishes the external substance in her work. When asked what she felt about the word "nature," she replied: "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 rims a lake in the Garden of Eden, the instant before the Fall.

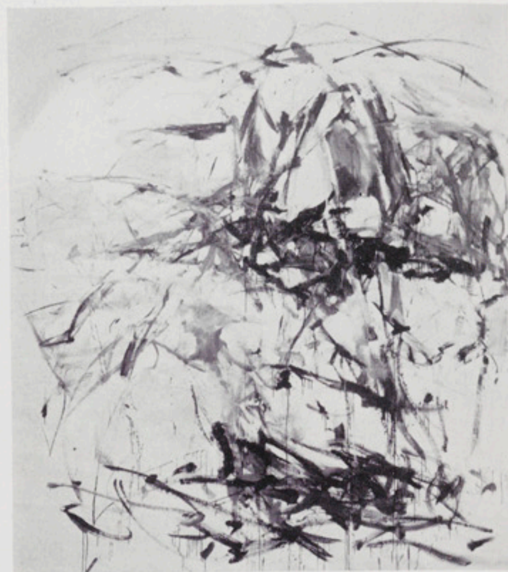
The expression of remembered joy has priority over the painting process. The artist tries to forget herself while working. "I want to make myself available to myself. The moment that I am self-conscious, I cease painting. When I think of how I am doing it, I've been bored for some time, and I stop. I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



5 Joan Mitchell: *Bridge,* stage 1.

6 *Bridge,* stage 2.



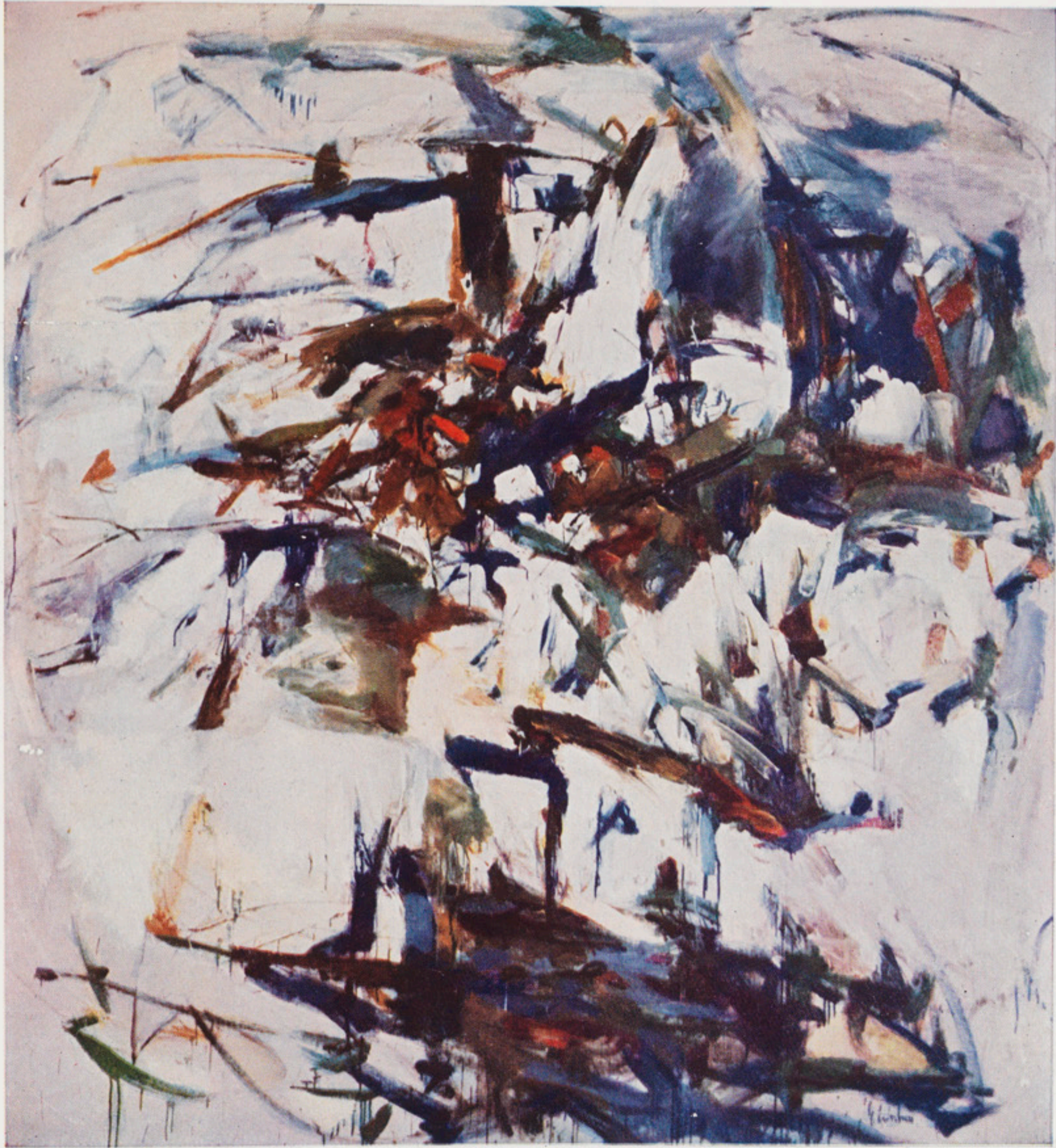
7 *George,* stage 1.

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 al-

8 Joan Mitchell at work on *Bridge*



9 *George Swimming at Barnes Hole, but It Got too Cold,* finished. Stable Gallery, N.Y.

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 (23 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, half-way 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 Titians [p. 68].

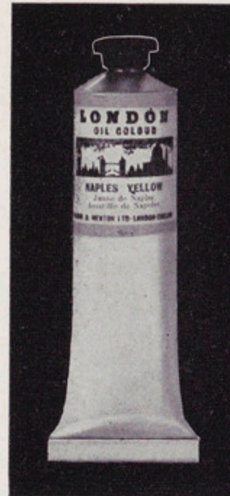
The grandiose *piano nobile*, or first floor of the palace, houses besides the extensive galleries of nineteenth-century Neapolitan art, the collections of porcelain and Renaissance bronzes and medals and the armory of ancient weapons (after the one in Turin, the best in Italy), a simplified reconstruction of a royal suite of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As in the Pinacoteca, the *pièce-de-résistance* of the suite, a small room entirely walled in porcelain, [fig. **8**] has a history of peregrination. The Rococo revetment, with chinoiserie plaques and birds, monkeys, flowers and fruit perched on or twined 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 extravaganza 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 convincing than that of the usual royal apartments, all over the Continent, whose shabby grandeur may call up dull historic echoes but offers little pleasure to the eye. Discreetly cleaned and refurbished, with upholstery and draperies rewoven 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

act, then I want to know what my brush is doing."

Miss Mitchell painted intermittently for several days, and then determined to abandon the picture. Unlike many New York artists, who scrape, scoop and change, she normally adds paint and rarely makes basic alterations, preferring, rather, to destroy the whole work. However in the case of *Bridge*, she hesitated and decided to save this canvas for future study. The picture was rejected because the feeling was not specific enough, and because the painting was not "accurate." To her, accuracy involves a clear image produced in the translation of the substance of nature into the nature of memory. It also involves the mechanics of abstract painting, the creation of a positive-negative ambiguity necessary to achieve such clarity. "Lines," for instance, "can't just float in representational space." When asked about color, she shrugged and said, "I guess I would wish it not to be what Hofmann calls 'monotonous,' that is tonal and boring"; on light, "I hate it when it looks muddy [earthbound]." "Motion is important, but not in the Futurist sense. A movement should also sit still [the peregrination of memory]." The artist's armlong sweeps are always caught back in horizontal and vertical lines, giving her paintings their structure. Above all, she must like her pictures. She stressed, "I am not a member of the make-it-ugly school." Her works are, what Baudelaire called, "the mnemotechny of the beautiful."

After putting aside the first canvas, she became somewhat depressed and found it difficult to work. Yet she felt that she had to, so she



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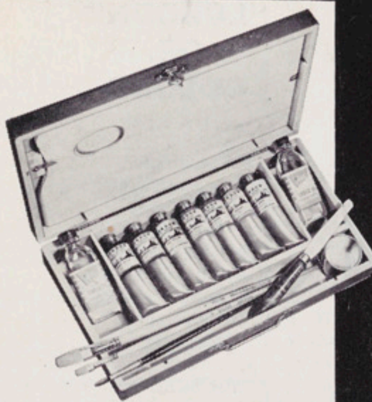

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forced herself to paint, but what? Miss Mitchell needs a subject she likes in order to feel positively enough to work. A friend jokingly suggested that she paint a poodle she once had swimming. The dog, George, became the mnemonic catalyst which provided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

George Swimming at Barnes Hole began as a lambent yellow painting [fig. 7], but during the second all-night session, the work changed. The lustrous yellows turned to opaque whites, and the feeling 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 Hampton in the autumn of 1954 invaded the picture. Since her early childhood, lake storms have been a frightening symbol both of devastation 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 multi-colored 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.N., Mar. '57]. She liked *George*, but felt that it still lacked a certain structure and an "accuracy 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 increasingly 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 the flat surface, which they more 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 implication, 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 existent 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 principle.

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 left 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 interesting to observe how deity shrinks in scale as "reality" and Humanism take over, as in the Renaissance, where the human figure dominates 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 different 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