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Joan Mitchell at 100: UCSB spotlights a modern master

Artist Joan Mitchell's bold, lyrical canvases made her one of the defining voices of Abstract Expressionism — and one of the few women to claim an enduring place in the movement's history. A century after her birth, institutions around the world are celebrating her legacy, including UC Santa Barbara's Art, Design & Architecture Museum.

The museum has mounted a focused exhibition of "Sunflower" (1970), one of the most significant works in its collection and an early entry in Mitchell's celebrated sunflower series. Gifted to the museum in 1985, the massive canvas fills nearly an entire wall, greeting viewers with a field of color and texture that conveys both vitality and fragility.

"Sunflower is one of the most important works in our collection," said Ana Briz, assistant director and curator of exhibitions at the AD&A Museum. "Mitchell is a towering figure of Abstract Expressionism, and she holds her own alongside names like Jackson Pollock. But she also carved out space as a woman in a movement largely defined by men. Many women artists have looked up to her as a model of independence and creative integrity."

Over the course of four decades, Mitchell established herself as one of the most significant American painters of the postwar era. After training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she became an active participant in the New York School before relocating to France in 1959. There she forged an independent path, painting

from her home in Vétheuil until her death in 1992.

“Joan Mitchell was one of the consummate abstractionists of the mid-twentieth century,” said Jenni Sorkin, professor and chair of UCSB’s Department of History of Art and Architecture. “As a woman artist, her career in New York was untenable and strained by convention. This caused her to leave the United States and re-settle in France, where she found an artistic freedom unbound to the provincialism of New York and the circle of all-male artists anointed by the critic Clement Greenberg. Mitchell’s loose brushstrokes evoke an unmatched lyricism and responsiveness to the natural world.”

That lyricism is especially evident in “Sunflower.” Briz emphasized the painting’s emotional power as much as its monumental size: nearly five feet by five feet. “When you stand in front of it, you’re enveloped in fields of color and texture. The work reflects on the sunflower at the end of its cycle, with yellows, purples and blacks evoking both vitality and decay. It’s a meditation on life and death, on beauty and impermanence. There’s tension in the composition — it feels almost like the flower is falling — and that mirrors the existential questions the work raises.”

“Joan Mitchell 100” at the AD&A Museum is one of more than 70 international presentations marking the centennial of Mitchell’s birth. The exhibition is accompanied by a short film, “Joan Mitchell: An Introduction,” courtesy of the Joan Mitchell Foundation, and is supported by the AD&A Museum Council.

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draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.