

PRESS RELEASE

## JOAN MITCHELL Sunflowers

7 June – 25 July 2009, Hauser & Wirth Zürich

Opening: Saturday 6 June 2009, 5 – 8 pm

Hauser & Wirth Zürich presents 'Joan Mitchell. Sunflowers', the first solo exhibition of the revered Abstract Expressionist to take place in Switzerland since 1962. Her Sunflower works count amongst the most experimental and vibrant of all her pieces. Hung in the upstairs gallery, six canvases dating from the 1960s and the year before her death, etchings and drawings host an extraordinary diversity of marks with compositions whose ungovernable vitality refuse to comply to the rules of image making. Mitchell considered sunflowers to be 'like people' — subjects to empathise with whose life cycles were played out with exuberance but brutal swiftness. 'If I see a sunflower drooping, I can droop with it,' she explained, 'and I draw it, and feel it until its death.' Like van Gogh whose precedent she was brave enough to summon, she embraced sunflowers for their hopefulness as much as for their assertive and undeniable splendour. Her images do not much resemble the plants themselves: they are blue and red as well as golden, erratically dancing sweeps of colour that communicate internal as much as external landscape.

Mitchell began the Sunflower works after relocating from Paris to Vétheuil, a town 60 kilometres north of the capital. They grew out of a particularly difficult time in the artist's life, following her mother's death in 1967 after a seven year struggle with cancer. The paintings from this earlier period are dark and foreboding, roiling tempests of paint. In *Calvi* (1964) named after a Corsican fishing port Mitchell visited on a sailing trip, a central area of densely worked impasto sits on top of a haze of translucent layers of pigment which conjures a landscape distance. The impression of solid weight achieved through the tactile physicality at the heart of this canvas recalls Cézanne, yet rather than suggest the volume of actual objects, Mitchell's build-up of paint makes emotion palpable.

*Untitled*, 1968-1969, and the drawing *Untitled* (1967) convey a different, brighter mood, whilst etchings the artist made in the early '70s establish a whiplash fluency of line. As the critic and poet John Yau has noted, the works of this period grant the viewer 'an intimate encounter with a sumptuous but harsh lyricism that constantly courts but never succumbs to chaos.' In these pieces, Mitchell's marks possess a fresh looseness, their brio asserted in opposing colours and unexpected positionings. Nature is conjured at its most unruly and oppositional: frenzy co-exists with calm, flux results in disruptiveness.

In *Untitled* (1969) Mitchell pursues this diversity of painted gesture and unevenness of composition to magnificent extreme. Thick areas of red and yellow paint reveal a frenzy of working whilst elsewhere the canvas is marked only by faint washes of green. Drips slide down the picture and snarls of paint grow glistening and creamy where they collide with white. According to the writer Dave Hickey, Mitchell's 'manner is at once too varied and specified to ever be "a style". She could make any mark but she never fell in love with one,

just the speed of it.' Her works make lasting passion, movement and energy, describing not the appearance of the world nor transcendent revelation, but the nature of being in it, its transient, intense pleasures and pains.

In the final years of her life Mitchell returned to the subject of sunflowers with renewed focus. These often multi-part canvases are assured, employing a carefully edited palette and calligraphic energy conveyed through lavish brushmarks. In these, a potential self-containment of individual rosettes is countered by the sideways spreading from one into several canvases allowing for a range of inter-related expressions that are vast and open-ended. 'I want them to hold one image despite all the activity,' Mitchell has said of her works. 'It's kind of a plumb line that dancers have; they have to be perfectly balanced the more frenetic the activity is.'

*Joan Mitchell was born in Chicago in 1925 and died in Paris in 1992 at the age of 67. She came to attention in the early 1950s, exhibiting at the Stable Gallery in New York alongside Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg. In the summer of 1955 she travelled to France, settling there permanently in 1959. There have been numerous gallery and museum exhibitions of Mitchell's work, including two major shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974 and 2002, which toured across the United States. Recent group exhibitions include 'Action/Abstraction: Abstract Expressionism and Postwar America' (2008), The Jewish Museum, New York, which travelled to Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Significant Form, The Persistence of Abstraction' (2008), Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow; and Action Painting (2008), Fondation Beyeler, Basel. A touring solo exhibition, 'Joan Mitchell: A Discovery of the New York School', which opened at Kunsthalle Emden, Germany (2008 – 2009), can be seen at Palazzo Magnani, Reggio Emilia, Italy until June. Her paintings can be seen in museums and important private collections worldwide.*

The exhibition has been organised in collaboration with Cheim & Read and the Joan Mitchell Foundation.

'Joan Mitchell, Leaving America: New York to Paris 1958 – 1964' (2007), a catalogue published by STEIDL Hauser & Wirth featuring 20 colour plates and an essay by Helen Molesworth, is available from the gallery.

An exhibition of new works by Paul McCarthy can be seen concurrently in the downstairs gallery.

GALLERY HOURS Tuesday to Friday 12 – 6 pm, Saturday 11 am – 5 pm

OPENING HOURS DURING ART BASEL: Sunday 7 June, 11 am – 8 pm,

Monday – Friday, 10 am – 6 pm, Saturday and Sunday, 11 am – 5 pm

FORTHCOMING EXHIBITION: PIPILOTTI RIST, 29 August – 17 October 2009

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