



Joan Mitchell (1925 - 1992)

Untitled, 1958

Oil on canvas mounted on masonite

20 by 21 1/4 inches (50.8 x 54 cm)



Joan Mitchell (1925-1992)

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1958

Oil on canvas mounted on masonite

20 by 21 ¼ inches (50.8 x 54 cm)

Provenance: Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason, New York (acquired directly from the artist)
Cecily Kahn
Rago Lambertville, New Jersey, *Post War & Contemporary Art*, May 23,
2023, lot 121
Private collection, Europe

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Untitled, 1958



With its vivid yet restrained passages of brilliant paint sweeping across its enigmatic surface, Joan Mitchell's *Untitled, 1958* is an exemplary work painted at the height of her creative powers. The relative scarcity of gestures along the present work's edges contrasts harmoniously with its dense and energetic center. This inward movement, expressed by interlocking colors, forms, and brushstrokes, presents a contested picture plane. Slashing strokes, interlacing and overlapping colors, and the immeasurable range of marks from transparent to opaque are hallmarks of Mitchell's finest work of the late 1950s. Activated whites intersperse deep purples, rich yellows, and vibrant blues and reds, all grounded by enigmatic earth tones. Art historian Linda Nochlin writes, "In Mitchell's works...meaning and emotional intensity are produced structurally, as it were, by a whole series of oppositions: dense versus transparent strokes; gridded structure versus more chaotic, ad hoc construction; weight on the bottom of the canvas versus weight on the top; light versus dark chopping versus continuous brush strokes; harmonious and clashing juxtapositions of hue—all are potent signs of meaning and feeling...The gridded planes of color hover over and retreat from the surface of the canvas. And what colors they are: pink, oranges, a touch of vernal green, and then those streaks of hovering darkness that so often seem designed to disrupt ease of comfort or harmony in Mitchell's best canvases" (Linda Nochlin, "Joan Mitchell: A Rage to Paint" in Jane Livingston, Ed., *Joan Mitchell*, New York 2002, pp. 55-58.)

Untitled, 1958, holds a special place in the history of Joan Mitchell's works. It was acquired by fellow "Second Generation" Abstract Expressionist painter Wolf Kahn during a visit to Mitchell's Paris studio. The painting remained in Kahn's private collection until his death in 2020, a testament to the mutual admiration and friendship between the two artists. Mitchell was known to only title works that went from her studio to the walls of an exhibition, making *Untitled's* lack of title a mark of the personal connection between the artist and the work's first owner.

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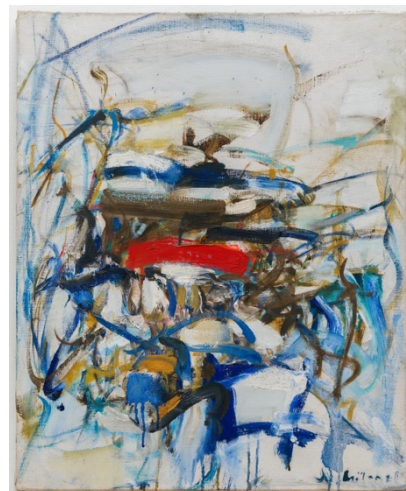
The late 1950s were a transitory period in the artist's personal life and career, punctuated by frequent travel between New York City and Paris. Though she exhibited in New York throughout the 1950s, Mitchell felt the need for her own artistic space, away from the social pressures of her Abstract Expressionist peers. Paris, which Mitchell first visited in 1948, was a city where she could breathe. Still, she regularly traveled back and forth to the United States, which proved challenging for an artist whose practice primarily centered on large-scale, abstract paintings. A shift to smaller canvases made sense as she moved in between studios. The art critic John Yau emphasizes that these works from the 1950s, *Untitled* included, are more than studies or placeholders for the artist's larger practice. Instead, works like *Untitled* are complete in themselves, compact encapsulations of Mitchell's artistic interests in the period (John Yau, *Joan Mitchell*, edited by Sarah Roberts and Katy Siegel, The San Francisco Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2020, p. 46.)

The energy generated by the aesthetic contrasts in *Untitled* embodies the emotion inherent in the artist's best work, which defined her career and set her apart from fellow Abstract Expressionists. Mitchell's ability to harness the potent tension of alternately dancing and dense layers of paint, muscular and delicate brushstrokes, and effusive freedom within an organized structure is evidenced in the present work. "Along with Mitchell's increasing success in the late 1950s came an ever greater vigor and assurance in her work," states art historian Judith Bernstock. "Energy radiates from the indefatigable painter to the canvas activated by intense colors and powerful brushstrokes almost to the point of chaos but ultimately resolved in a balanced order" (J. Bernstock, *Joan Mitchell*, New York, 1988, pp. 34-35.)

Similar paintings to *Untitled* can be found in museum collections around the world, including *Untitled*, 1955-60, The Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, and *Untitled*, 1956, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.



Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, 1955-60, The Seattle Art Museum, Seattle



Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, 1956, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco