Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Blue is an eternal color
It means infinite bliss
When it turns to black
I turn my back and go away
To blue the eternal color
When it turns to red I pray [. . .]

Slightly taller and wider than an average male museum visitor standing with his arms outspread, Joan Mitchell’s Untitled engulfs the viewer in an energetic lattice of red, blue, black, green, and brown brushstrokes. Varying dramatically in opacity and color saturation, her loose, often drippy marks move from vertical to horizontal to diagonal, and they coalesce into and dissolve out of intricate knots. As the above verses from Jim Brodey’s poem “Joan Mitchell” suggest, her paintings evoke psychological states rather than depict recognizable subjects.

Mitchell is closely associated with abstract expressionism. Developed in New York in the late 1940s by painters who included Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock and given a theoretical framework by the influential critic Clement Greenberg, this new form of “nonobjective” painting was characterized by the exuberant application of paint to express primal states of being. Although she frequented the studios of de Kooning, Gorky, and Kline and was a regular at their favorite Greenwich Village watering hole, the Cedar Tavern, Mitchell belonged to a younger, second generation of abstract expressionists who expanded the concept of pure abstraction.

Asked why he didn’t work more from nature, Jackson Pollock famously declared, “I am nature!” Mitchell, however, never subscribed to the existential and self-referential tenets of abstract expressionism, instead remaining closely connected to the physical world. “I’m very old-fashioned but not reactionary,” she explained. “My paintings aren’t about art issues. They’re about a feeling that comes to me from the outside, from landscape.” Like her early influences, Paul Cézanne and Wassily Kandinsky, artists who sought new ways to express impressions of the world in painterly form, Mitchell attempted to translate subjective sense memories through the objective medium of paint on canvas. “I paint,” she once wrote, “from remembered landscapes that I carry with me – and remembered feelings of them, which of course become transformed. I could certainly never mirror nature. I would like more to paint what it leaves me with.”

The art historian Marcia Tucker characterized Mitchell’s work as “private, vulnerable, full of the energy of madness and genius, elegance and unparalleled physical intensity.” Untitled dynamically expresses, and balances, the qualities Tucker identified.

Toby Kamps
About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Callen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Loving to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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