

## HAUSER & WIRTH

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### Three Women

In 1982, my parents went to visit Joan Mitchell in France and arranged for me to stay with her for one month. My mother's old New York City roommate, Martha Bertolotto, Joan's college roommate at Smith, was the connection.

I flew to France in early July and spent a night in Paris, visiting Joan's impressive retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which I didn't understand. The next day I arrived at her house near Vétueil, a small village northwest of the city, on a hill overlooking the Seine. I walked up the gravel driveway, went inside and found Joan in the dining room with her three German shepherds—Iva and her daughters, Marion and Madeleine. They usually began barking as soon as the gate was opened, but they didn't make a sound. Instantly, Joan loved me. The dogs came first.

The interior was stark. A billiards table dominated the living room, with a small Mitchell triptych over the fireplace. There was a bedroom, just a bed, where Joan slept; the dining room with two sheet-covered couches for the dogs; a balcony with a view to the river; and a kitchen. On the second floor, paintings by Sam Francis hung in the hallway above bookshelves stuffed with paperback mysteries. The octagonal library held more books, a television set, a small drawing by Matisse and a small painting by Kline. I slept in the main bedroom nearby, the largest, which Joan had abandoned when she broke up with her lover, the Canadian painter Jean Paul Riopelle. Outside, a large garden held fruit trees, vegetables, flowers, and the raspberries I picked and ate each day.

We settled into a routine. Afternoons, I painted landscapes outside using only white, ultramarine blue and raw sienna, to Joan's bemusement. Notes to me from Joan, written after I'd gone to bed, were left on the billiards table, scrawled on scraps of paper and score sheets, along with tubes of paint from Lefebvre-Foinet, the Paris paint store that had supplied



Joan Mitchell and Joyce Pensato, Vétueil, France, 1983

Kandinsky, Matisse, Modigliani and Miró. 'Squeeze paint!' she'd say. I didn't listen, but I cherished the paint nevertheless.

Joan usually stayed awake until dawn and got up at three in the afternoon. She claimed to be afraid of the dark and said she needed to check her paintings' colors in natural light, but I think she also wanted to sleep until cocktail time. After rising, with coffee and newspaper at a table on the slope leading up to her studio, she was dry and self-contained. Drinking began after breakfast, Campari laced with vodka. By the time I went to bed, her voice had begun to drawl and conversation could turn maudlin. But I didn't notice this until the following year.

Dinner was usually simple, a melon, chicken with tarragon, and cheese, all with red wine. Afterwards, Joan would bring her gallon of Johnny Walker up to the library to watch the news. Gisèle Barreau, a brilliant young composer who was living with Joan that summer, would retire with two beers to her private room up the stairs, inside the round tower. Joan and I, and sometimes Noel (her assistant from town), would talk until 3 AM in the kitchen or in her studio.

A veteran of years of psychotherapy, Joan enjoyed ferreting out all of my life's details. She analyzed letters from my mother—the oldest of five from a shabby Irish family who loved shopping and owning nice things. To Joan (still the wealthy WASP, in spite of her bohemian lifestyle) my mother was an arriviste. I had never really questioned my parent's personalities, so this was new to me. But Joan liked my cranky architect father.

Joan told stories of her friendship with Giacometti and an affair with Beckett, who was crazy about her painting. She loved color and light; adored the work of Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Bonnard, and the abstract expressionists; detested the latest trends—neo-expressionism, neo-geo, conceptualism and even Warhol. I was obsessed with Morandi. She said he was death. She described her sadistic German nurse, her deaf mother, and her father who had wanted a boy as the roots of her bifurcation into sensitive little Joan, who painted, had feelings, and dissolved into the world around her, and big Joan, who was always prepared to lash out. When I pulled out my catalog for her Paris show, she insisted that the curators had tried to make her work look terrible and that big Joan had rescued the installation. I couldn't understand why they would want to sabotage a show they had organized, but I didn't argue.

Ostensibly, I was there to take care of the dogs when Joan was away, but she rarely left the house. Since her messy 1979 breakup with Riopelle she had avoided the town, where they had been notorious for restaurant arguments. Their open relationship endured until Riopelle began an affair right in the house with a young dog sitter who was supposed to be uninterested in men. Joan, devastated, resumed psychotherapy, saying she felt so helpless that she was unable to cross the street. The car in the garage behind the studio was never used. Travel was mostly for exhibitions and gallery meetings. With Riopelle, she had socialized with a broad array of artists, writers, and musicians, but now her world was limited to a small circle of friends. It was protected, and also stifled.

Joan's sister Sally, who lived in California, had terminal cancer. Joan had visited her in the spring and then followed her decline by telephone. The details were dire and distressing, and Joan found it comforting to tell me about them. Morning notes included updates from early calls. Death was omnipresent, but music helped, especially opera. Maria Callas blasted from the studio all night, helping Joan to work through sadness. Towards the end of my month in the house, Sally died.

Joyce Pensato arrived with her best friend, Carl Plansky, a day or two before I left. Joan and Joyce had bonded at the Studio School in New York, perhaps due to their love for energetically slashed paint. Joyce once stayed with Joan for an astonishing six months, and called herself a Joanie, but it was an odd friendship. Joan's mother was a poet, as were many of Joan's friends, and accurate language in her presence was crucial. Joyce was a second-generation Sicilian American who had great difficulty writing. I often helped her turn disjointed phrases into complete sentences for grant applications and recommendations. Once she saw her words clearly, she was unwavering about what she wanted to say, resisting all embellishment.

After I left that summer, life was never quite the same. I began therapy with Jaqueline Fried, who was also treating Joyce and Carl. Jaqui is the daughter of Joan's much mourned longtime therapist, Edrita Fried. (Joan painted an enormous four-panel work in her memory.) Back in New York, Carl and Joyce got me a part time job at David Davis art supply store on LaGuardia Place, south of Washington Square Park, where they both worked—Joyce as a salesperson, Carl as merchandise ordering manager. The neo-expressionist painters all shopped there.

My job was ambiguous. I was supposed to be David's secretary, but I usually worked on a grandiose hundred-page catalog printed on the in-store copy machine. Included were endless price lists for all the store's paints (one price for each size), illustrated with photographs of tubes made on the copier. Phone inquiries were handled by the staff, but sometimes David would answer, ranting about the wonderful things he sold, and offering to mail the caller a catalog. I'd make copies until the machine ran out of toner (usually before the print run was completed) and then wait for the repair person to refill it.

David always looked shabby and was sometimes known to panhandle in the park. His living arrangements were mysterious; he probably slept in the basement. When smells wafted up, Carl would announce that David was downstairs burning a fish. If, to everyone's relief, David took a day trip out to the stretcher-strip factory, I would go to the artist-run restaurant Food for lunch and spend two hours going to galleries.

Even though my desk was inches from David, I tried to keep my distance. Joyce, on the other hand, was forever grateful he had given her a job, mainly because she was so disorganized. Money was stuffed into pockets and unzipped handbags. Receipts were tossed into drawers. Wallets, keys and passports were constantly being lost. Her clothes were always messy and her fingernails grimy with paint and charcoal. If anyone came to her apartment to visit, she stuffed everything into the closet. She had very little confidence in her Sicilian beauty and tweezed her heavy eyebrows relentlessly. However, like Joan, she was crystal clear about what mattered: painting, integrity and emotional truth.

After my first year of therapy, I went back to spend another month in Vétheuil. This time, having gone over my previous summer with the therapist, I changed my approach. I went to bed at midnight and refused to show Joan my paintings until just before I left, a big mistake.

Death was still an obsession for her. A cousin of Gisèle's who had died of cancer inspired Joan's 'La Grande Vallee,' a series of paintings named after a spot in Brittany where Gisèle and the cousin had played. Another guest, an attractive young man from Australia, was there interviewing Joan when I arrived. Noel was history—he'd been caught stealing over the winter.

Having told the Australian about Noel in depth, Joan wanted the interviewer to see him in person, so the two of us walked to the restaurant where Noel worked. Two beers got me drunk,

and I went straight to bed when we returned. The next morning I was horrified that Joan was still awake. Noel had whistled at me when we left, which I didn't notice but the Australian had told Joan, who turned the incident into a major drama. She told me I was 'planer,' French for having one's head in the clouds.

I really was spaced out—but not completely. Mostly I was concerned with my awful paintings, rigidly organized images of fruit trees, still in muted colors, but on canvases rather than on boards. When the time came to unveil them, Joyce had already arrived. I arranged them proudly on the porch, and Joan was (understandably, in hindsight) not impressed. The only one she liked was a small painting of the town's church. It, at least, she said, had some air between the brushstrokes.

Bitterly disappointed, I went to bed disconsolate. Joyce, probably amused, was sympathetic when we left the next morning for a day trip to Chartres. I was tremendously relieved to get away from that claustrophobic house, and the relief was even stronger on the plane going home. That was my final visit to Vétheuil. I was not mature enough to handle Joan.

But we did keep in touch. We wrote, and when Joan was in New York, we would go to shows with Carl and Joyce. We'd meet in her hotel room, always at the Westbury, sometimes along with other artists. Often, she embarrassed us by repeating our confidences to everyone. Once she brought a poet friend to my apartment.

Joan's New York openings were exciting, first at Fourcade and then, after Xavier Fourcade died in 1987, at Robert Miller. The four-panel painting 'Edrita Fried' was hung in the 1983 Whitney biennial, also a thrill. In an enthralling Studio School lecture that year Joan spoke with the excitement of a teenager about her enthusiasm for abstract expressionism, recalling her searches for de Kooning and staying up all night with Kline. During my time with her in New York, I was careful not to get too close. Joan wanted to talk about my breakup with my composer ex-boyfriend. I wanted to move on.

Somehow, I'd managed to be clueless about Joan's mouth cancer, discovered in 1984 and removed by intense radiation that left her jaw fragile and her mouth almost too dry to eat solid food. She had had two hip replacements, which made walking increasingly difficult. In 1989, she was diagnosed with early-stage esophagus cancer, and she died in 1992 from advanced lung cancer. Jaqui, the therapist, told me about her last hospitalization, but advised me not to call.

Carl and Joyce were among the first artists to live in Williamsburg. Joyce's apartment was on Devoe Street, around the corner from her unheated ballroom studio on Olive. She wasn't quite ready to use the huge space, so she painted in the balcony where the orchestra had played and stretched a badminton net across the main floor. Friends came to her apartment for poker nights, and, at a large Thanksgiving dinner, tables stretched from the kitchen to the railroad flat's back room, her winter drawing studio.

Joyce worked her day job at the art-supply store full time until her father died in the mid-eighties, and she decided to quit to concentrate on her art. Alongside paintings by her lifelong friend Christopher Wool, her work was on view in the inaugural exhibition at Four Walls in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1984. She was also in a group show at Monique Knowlton, a fancy SoHo gallery. Both featured powerful charcoal drawings of ghostly linear creatures, alternately

built up and erased. They'd evolved from her Studio School drawings of found Batman masks, old Mickey Mouse toys and used gloves.

Her canvases, in contrast, had heavily built-up surfaces, black with subtle bits of color, resembling dried lava or soil. Layers of paint were added and violently scraped away, often making holes. Themes of abjection were widespread in the 1980s art world, and Joyce's paintings could be seen as scatological. Her first big break, a two-person show with Rona Pondick, an up-and-coming artist who made sculptures of excrement and babies, was cancelled two weeks before the opening.

Friends were disgusted by the cancellation, and studio visits were arranged. Joyce's charcoal drawings of cartoon characters always seemed to outshine her abstract paintings. The French dealer Anne de Villepoix was bored in the ballroom, for example, but jumped to attention when she saw Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. The drawings were included in a 1992 group show at Lühring Augustine with Arnulf Rainer and Paul McCarthy and another group show at 303 Gallery. After several projects in France, she had a 1994 solo in Paris with de Villepoix. Joan had never been encouraging about Joyce's paintings, saying they reminded her of skin disease. Joan insisted on color and light, while Joyce was obsessed with darkness. But her loyalty to Joan never wavered. Even after Joan died, Joyce got in touch with Gisèle whenever she went to France.

If Joyce considered Joan to be her mentor, Joyce was mine. She enthralled me from the day I met her, long before I learned to understand her painting. Perhaps it was just her big heart. Though it took years for her to start to like my work, she was my therapy older sister and we spent a lot of time together. When I started making maniacal drawings of Dali after my father's death in 1998, she finally approved, perhaps the most gratifying recognition ever. Art had to reach out and grab Joyce—she wasn't interested in anything subtle. Her favorite criticisms were: 'It's not enough' and 'It's holding back.'

We both loved costumes and photography, and throughout the late eighties we always went to see the start of the Greenwich Village Halloween parade, when everyone was posing and there were a lot of lights. When Joyce traveled, the copious toys that she collected and used as inspiration for her work came along with her and posed on hotel beds and restaurant chairs. She shot them in her studio, too, with dramatic lighting and shadows, on furniture covered with cascades of dripped paint.

Joyce's dogs, Max, followed by Charlie, were completely untrained and indulged. If they peed on the floor, Joyce was undisturbed. She walked them with the longest possible leash so they could proceed at their pleasure. When visitors arrived, Joyce would throw keys out the window—she hated stairs. Although she never had a problem climbing ladders for large work, she avoided all other exercise. She gained weight but didn't care, once noting at an artist's talk that her command of painting space grew along with her body. At restaurants, she picked at food, but she snacked on junk all day.

After she quit working for David Davis, she survived on infrequent art sales. When that dried up, she relied on infusions of cash from her mother and brother, enduring lots of telephone nagging in return and partially repaying them when something finally sold. Joyce and Carl had helped Joan move out of her St. Marks Place apartment and some of Joan's things were still in Joyce's studio, so she sometimes sold a Mitchell pastel. She had lots of Joan's photos as well, along with a cherished painting stool.

In 1995, Joyce joined Max Protetch and had solo shows that year and two years later, but she left when Protetch asked her to make caricatures. She didn't have a New York gallery for almost a decade afterwards, and then, as she often put it, her ship came in when Friedrich Petzel took her on in 2007, giving her five solo exhibitions in the years that followed. There were also solo shows at Lisson in London, Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago, Grice Bench in Los Angeles, and Nanzuka in Japan; a retrospective at the Santa Monica Museum in 2013, and solo shows and projects at other museums in Fort Worth, St. Louis, and Boston. After so many years of struggle, she was finally living her dream, and the last twelve years of her life were years of celebration.

Most of the time, she was glued to her studio, making the 'donuts' and 'meatballs' — her fabulous paintings of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Batman, and Homer Simpson. She often said that her paintings were finished when they scared her and made her laugh at the same time. Cartoon characters were her inspiration, but her work was never cartoony, a term she reserved for superficial art. She intertwined numerous layers of black and white paint to make riveting images of chaotic exultation and fury, fearlessly obliterating one version after another until she was completely satisfied.

Even when she'd hardly any money, Joyce insisted on paying for her annual restaurant birthday dinners. Now, when she emerged from her studio for openings and special occasions, elaborate parties were thrown. There were photoshoots with wigs, crazy sunglasses, golden shower caps, and toy guns, wonderful food, champagne, and cocktails. She treated herself to a freeze-dried palm tree for the studio, which was otherwise filled with paint-spattered toys, giant cutouts of Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley, and endless open enamel cans holding expensive Chinese brushes suspended in congealed paint. Other luxuries included Chanel sneakers, haircuts at the Plaza, staying at the Viceroy in Santa Monica, and never taking the subway again.

Joan remained a lodestar for Joyce, as the ultimate tough woman artist, a mentor and a role model. In May 2018, Joyce and I were thrilled to attend a symposium at the Guggenheim in preparation for the current Joan Mitchell retrospective in San Francisco and Baltimore. Tragically, Joyce did not live to see the show and its magnificent catalog. The frontispiece reproduces a letter from Joan to Joyce, and the book includes a wonderful essay by Joyce about Joan (produced from interviews). At least in the book, they'll be together forever, for posterity. As for me, I wish I'd understood Joan's paintings when I knew her. Now I am in awe.