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ARTnews

Mary Weatherford Revisits a 1957 ARTnews Profile of Painter Joan Mitchell

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In 1957, art critic Irving Sandler paid a visit to the studio of painter Joan Mitchell, an Abstract Expressionist known for her brushy images capturing nature. The result of that visit, printed in the October 1957 issue of *ARTnews*, became one of the most famous essays in this magazine's "Paints a Picture" series, in which an artist illuminates the process behind one of his or her artworks. With an upcoming traveling retrospective of Mitchell's work at the Baltimore Museum of Art in mind, *ARTnews* enlisted Mary Weatherford, an artist who has spoken of being inspired by Mitchell, to discuss Sandler's article. "He's a beautiful writer, so clear, so easy to read," Weatherford said of Sandler's writing. "I want to be the equivalent when I'm talking about this."

Irving Sandler on Joan Mitchell: She finds particularly distasteful moral insinuations concerning "good" versus "bad" criteria, and insists that "there is no one way to paint; there is no single answer." Miss Mitchell is reticent to talk about painting, so in order to approach the underlying processes in her work, the Socratic method was needed, rejecting some classifications, modifying or keeping others.

Mary Weatherford on Irving Sandler: He basically tells us at the very beginning that for this article he just ekes things out of her by asking lots of questions. I like that.... Sometimes, writing

about art gets swayed toward the artists, but really, it's always two artists—a collaboration, in a way. I can tell how hard Irving Sandler worked to try to get it right, to try to get down in the English language what Mitchell thought about her own work.

Unlike some of the younger artists who have reacted away from the elders of Abstract-Expressionism, she sees herself as a “conservative,” although her pictures can hardly be described as hidebound. She not only appreciates the early struggles of the older painters, whose efforts expedited acceptance for those following them, but finds a number of qualities in their work that have a profound meaning for her.

Here's the great thing about Sandler's writing: I don't notice much. A sentence goes down easy. His writing doesn't have any barbs on it. He's such a beautiful writer.

In the case of Bridge, she hesitated and decided to save this canvas for future study. The picture was rejected because the feeling was not specific enough, and because the painting was not “accurate.” To her, accuracy involves a clear image produced in the translation of the substance of nature into the nature of memory.

She starts a picture called *Bridge* for the article and then abandons it. Then she starts this other painting about her standard poodle [George Swimming at Barnes Hole]. I have a friend who, when he was a graduate student, interviewed Mitchell over a long period of time and asked her about that painting. He asked her if it got too cold for the dog to swim, and she said to him, “No, Paul, the painting got cold.” That's almost what Sandler is describing—that kind of process where she starts out with a good memory on a sunny day, and then the painting gets cold.

She liked George, but felt that it still lacked a certain structure and an “accuracy in intensity.” When asked about her personal meanings in this work and their communication, she answered: “If a painting comes from them, then they don't matter. Other people don't have to see what I do in my work.”

He's describing someone like a tennis player. You have to know what you're doing while you're making decisions. Your body has to be so trained that you can command it to make whatever decision your mind is thinking.