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## Review/Film

### Cinematic Portrait Of the Life Of an Artist

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The best thing about Marion Cajori's study of Joan Mitchell, the Abstract Expressionist painter who died in October at the age of 66, is the way it makes a complete emotional portrait of the toweringly acerbic artist by interweaving her conversation with shots of works that reveal her vulnerable inner life.

Ms. Mitchell had the demeanor of a formidable grande dame, 1950's bohemian-style, who was as imposing in her way as Jackson Pollock was in his. Reminiscing in an imperious baritone, in sentences that are clipped but loaded with emotional baggage, she recalls growing up in a well-to-do Chicago family. From early childhood, she says in the film, "Joan Mitchell: Portrait of an Abstract Painter," she was an achiever who won athletic medals to the delight of a father who drove her hard.

She became an abstract painter because she thought it was something he couldn't judge her on, she recalls. But the macho world of the Abstract Expressionists was in its way as competitive an environment as what she was trying to escape. She became something of a token female star. And her remarks about the none-too-subtle discrimination she endured are tinged with a deep bitterness and frustration.

In 1955, she moved to France to be with the French Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle, with whom she lived until 1979. "I was his mistress," she says bluntly about the man whose name she is loath to bring up. She says she never wanted to move abroad and shrugs, "But you do what the man wants."

In France, she bought an estate near Vetheuil, a town where Claude Monet lived. And although she vehemently denies the influence, her French canvases seem to have taken on some of Monet's color and light. Comparisons to Cezanne and Matisse, however, are not rejected. The closest she comes to evoking a personal esthetic is in an anecdote about finding a viper on her foot and her awareness at that moment of "being in nature."

The gorgeous shots of Mitchell's canvases, intercut with scenes of Paris and of Vetheuil and its environs, offer eloquent visual testimony to Mitchell's appetite for being in the moment. The canvases have grand chaotic romanticism. While celebrating the physical universe with an ecstatic love of color, they don't shy away from expressing a harsh, feral apprehension of nature and its violence.

Sharing the bill with "Joan Mitchell: Portrait of an Abstract Painter," which opened today at Film Forum 1, is Amy Harrison's witty, politically pointed art-world documentary, "Guerrillas in Our Midst." The film examines the Guerrilla Girls, a group of self-proclaimed art terrorists who formed in 1985 to protest sexism and racism in the art world. Members of the all-female group, which calls itself "the conscience of the art world," will not reveal their identities and appear in public wearing gorilla masks. Their tactics include dashing around in the middle of the night slapping up posters protesting sexual discrimination in the arts.

Some posters are bitterly funny, like the one listing "the advantages of being a woman artist." These include "working without the pressures of success," "not having to be in shows with men" and "knowing your career might pick up after you're 80." Others offer specific and damning statistics on the percentages of women and blacks shown by leading galleries.

And judging by the film's interviews with a selection of seemingly callous male gallery owners and art-world figures, the Guerrilla Girls are sorely needed. Although some of the men express a

grudging respect for the group, the tone of most of the commentary is hostile. It ranges from defensive (the art world is market-driven and the public infatuated with the myth of the male artist as creator-hero) to dismissive (the Guerrilla Girls are talentless showoffs seeking attention the only way they can).

The film is firmly on the side of the group, whose members are portrayed as justifiably outraged advocates of equality in a cynical, unregulated milieu of insider trading, entrenched sexism and unlimited greed. *Joan Mitchell Portrait of an Abstract Painter* Directed by Marion Cajori; co-produced by Christian Blackwood and Ms. Cajori; cinematography by Ken Kobland; released by Christian Blackwood Films. Film Forum 1, 209 Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 58 minutes. This film has no rating. *Guerrillas in Our Midst* Produced and directed by Amy Harrison; principal cinematography by Ellen Kuras; released by Women Make Movies. Film Forum 1, 209 Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 35 minutes. This film has no rating.