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Old Friend Films a Portrait of an Artist

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"You could safely say," said Klaus Kertess, adjunct curator of drawing at the Whitney Museum of American Art, that Joan Mitchell "is one of the greatest living painters."

Yet when a film maker, Marion Cajori of Setauket, proposed a documentary on the life and work of Ms. Mitchell, 66, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, a typical question was why she wanted to make a film about Joni Mitchell, the singer.

The people who decide on grants at the National Endowment for the Arts and "The American Masters" series on PBS turned down Ms. Cajori's proposal two times. Instead of becoming discouraged, she grew angry.

Teaming up with a well-known film maker, Christian Blackwood, as executive producer, Ms. Cajori scraped together the money for a 57-minute film, "Joan Mitchell, Portrait of an Abstract Painter." The film was shown on June 15 at the Pompidou Center in Paris and will be screened on Saturday in St. James.

Now, with Christian Blackwood Productions, Ms. Cajori is proposing a series of 13 documentaries, "American Women in Art: At the End of Our 20th Century."

Ms. Cajori's problems in obtaining support parallel the lack of recognition that Ms. Mitchell and other female artists of her generation faced. In the film, Ms. Mitchell recounts how American galleries in the 1950's had an unofficial policy of representing just two women. One art dealer told her, she

recalled, " 'If only you were French and male and dead, I'd show you.' " 'Did Something That Was Undoable'

"Women of that generation faced real difficulties," said Robert Storr, curator of the Museum of Modern Art department of painting and sculpture. Not until the late 70's was the way clear for women to make careers comparable to men's in art.

"Joan Mitchell and Louise Bourgeois did something that was undoable," Mr. Storr added. "They sustained their work and made it really tough and good without the constant attention that male artists got."

For Ms. Cajori, 42, the name Joan Mitchell was always a household word. The child of two painters, Ms. Cajori grew up in Paris at the epicenter of a tumultuous art colony. Family friends included American expatriate artists like Ms. Mitchell, Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman and Sam Francis. The Irish playwright Samuel Beckett and the French composers Pierre Boulez and Betsy Jolas were also part the circle.

Ms. Cajori calls her family story and childhood abroad complicated, saying her parents' circle of artist friends "partied in a rather dramatic way."

"There was a lot of alcohol, a heady atmosphere, but also a lot of troubled relationships and angry outbursts." she said. That made it "difficult to find one's identity." Running Away to the U.S.

Her first encounter with Ms. Mitchell, who became a lifelong friend, was when Ms. Cajori was 9 and the painter 33. "Joan was standing in front of one of her paintings dressed in blue jeans spattered with paint and looking very intent," Ms. Cajori recalled. The light from an overhead studio skylight "was a classic Parisian light, strong but sad."

At 16, Ms. Cajori returned to the United States to attend boarding school. "I was running away from art and that whole

scene, yet I could never fall into another kind of passion," she said. "I was running away from the very thing that I would identify myself with."

Ms. Cajori eventually stopped fleeing and, in 1971, entered the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. Her instructors included Carl Andre, Jonathan Borofsky, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt and Brice Marden. A faculty member, Hollis Frampton, introduced her to experimental film making.

Ms. Cajori made her first film in 1972, and was shown in film festivals and university programs. In 1981 her expressionistic "White Lies," starring Willem Dafoe, won festival awards and was shown internationally.

In 1989, Ms. Cajori, who has two young children and was "really thirsty for trees," moved to Long Island. She wrote and directed the documentary about Ms. Mitchell in 1990.

Ms. Mitchell, who left New York for France in 1959, had a strong personality. A camera crew's "traipsing around asking rude questions" for two months of filming was not an easy experience for Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Cajori said. Yet, because of the longstanding friendship between director and the artist, the film is an unusually intimate portrayal of the independent, intensely private painter.

"Joan and Marion have this incredibly close, almost symbiotic, relationship," an art critic, Elizabeth Hess, said. "Nobody in the whole world could have made this film except Marion. Joan trusts Marion, and she doesn't trust anyone. The film gets things out of her no one else could get."

"You can see art better in a museum than on the screen," Mr. Blackwood said. "Where film is invaluable is getting into the mind and soul of a person. Marion accomplished that."

"I played by Joan's rules," Ms. Cajori said. "As soon as we wanted something from her, she'd clam up. But if we let her meander, eventually something would come across." 'Her Inner Self Comes Across'

The film documents nearly 50 years of Ms. Mitchell's art, highlighting in the narration by Ms. Mitchell her relation to nature, to van Gogh's work and to her peers like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

"It's an exceptional film," the curator of exhibitions at the Whitney, Richard Marshall, said. "Considering how Ms. Mitchell guards the interior, her inner self comes across surprisingly well."

"What comes across," said Robert Miller, whose Robert Miller Gallery represents Ms. Mitchell in New York, "is the power, beauty and majesty of the paintings."

Gallery North of Setauket will screen the film at 7:30 P.M. on Saturday in the Knox School on Long Beach Road in St. James. Tickets are \$15, \$25 for a couple. Reservations, at 751-2676, are required.

Ms. Cajori said she hoped that the film would be the first in a series of 13 one-hour films on living American female artists like Louise Bourgeois, Agnes Martin and Elizabeth Murray. "I want to show a group of women who are flawed like the rest of us but incredibly strong and courageous about themselves. Women who, despite obstacles, really try to control their life and invent it."

Ms. Cajori has begun the next film, on Jennifer Bartlett, and is awaiting news from the N.E.A. on financing.

Mr. Blackwood has made 80 films, many of them documentaries on artists like Christo and David Hockney, as well as the critically acclaimed "Straight, No Chaser" on Thelonious Monk. "There are

very few films on women artists," Mr. Blackwood said. "Of the artists we've chosen, 80 percent are in their 70's and 80's. It's vital to make these films while the artists are still with us."

Ms. Cajori's goal in film is to portray how for women she calls her role models, art, life and identity are inseparable. Sitting on the porch of her Victorian cottage on the North Shore with her children romping about and six kittens tumbling in the grass, she seeks for herself "a kind of equilibrium," she said, "that nice balance between life and work, so they flow in the same direction."