« Joan Mitchell, crossing paths». Mâkhi Xenakis.

Symposium Joan Mitchell, New Orléans, 9 avril 2010.

http-//www.joanmitchelli#659D2C

First of all, I would like to thank you for the great honor of inviting me to participate in this Symposium on Joan Mitchell today. My encounter with Joan was so enriching, and so decisive, that I would like to impart a little of what she taught me, and the energy that she gave to me. I would like to forward my personal vision and emotions as Joan's friend, as an artist and as a woman.

I will try to evoke for others the solar and unique Joan whom I had the chance to meet. Just as I evoked Louise Bourgeois, in the book I wrote about her in 1998, "The Blind Leading the Blind". And also as I evoked my father in the book I wrote about him after his death in 2001, "Laisser Venir Les Fantômes".

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Speaking about Joan today has helped me realize how important this encounter was for me, and how decisive it was in my future life. My life as an artist was structured and strongly influenced by three people. Three great artists who have many points in common.

The first was my father, the composer Iannis Xenakis, who shared the act of giving me life. Despite that he never wanted me to follow in his footsteps into the world of art, but as we say in French, “I fell into the cooking-pot” when I was very young.

The second was Louise Bourgeois, whom I met when I lived in New York in 1987 and 1988, and who saved my life by giving me permission to accept myself and construct myself within my art.

The third was Joan Mitchell, who showed me the path I would take, to settle into my life as an adult woman and artist in France.

Today I will speak about all three of them. Not because I don't have enough to say about Joan Mitchell, but because I feel that if I try to use my memories of these three artists as a guiding theme to look at some of the questions that I approached with their help, then perhaps I can draw closer to the secrets and the universality of art.

I am certain that I have never met in any other artist than these three such charisma; such thirst for discovery; such clear and constant lucidity about the passage of time; or such a strong demand for authenticity, for themselves and for others around them.

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But for now let's listen to the words of Joan

She said, "If a painting is good, there's nothing else to say."

When we hear that, we feel how right she is. The choice of one word rather than another can reduce the meaning of a work, because only one aspect of it is selected to be shown. An artist chooses to sculpt, to paint or compose a piece of music because words and language don't suit what he or she wanted to express.

She also says, "Painting is a way to feel you're alive. Feeling, existing, living -- I think it's the same thing, but the quality is not the same. Existing means surviving -- it doesn't necessarily involve feeling. You can say Good morning, Good night. Feeling is something more. It's more than just survival."

These quotes come from the interviews she did with Yves Michaux in 1986 and 1989, and if we take a look at them, or at the films that were made about Joan, we can see that she constantly searched for the authenticity and simplicity of an idea. She was never overbearing or didactic.

Often at the beginning of the interviews she talks about her dogs. She says that she is painting for them, and that they watch her paintings…. Then when she is more at ease she begins to talk about nature, about lakes and fields, also about music, poetry,

physical sensations and lights. She says that when she is painting she feels protected from the idea of the passage of time. The idea of time passing distressed her, and made her think about the end -- about absence, and death.

She says this is why she chose painting. For Joan, apart from photography, all other forms of artistic expression -- whether it be music, writing, cinema, or theater -- have a beginning and an end. At some point they stop. Painting is the only place where she feels happy, calm, because time doesn't go by in the same way. It feels to her that she is in control of the moment when it should stop, and that until she decides that moment, death can't touch her.

In the movie that Marion Cajori filmed about Joan just before her death, it's impressive and moving to see how accurate she is, how precise and how touching. That moment when she talks about LIttle Joan and Big Joan -- how exact she is, how the intonations of her voice, the slight changes of her gaze, conjure up big Joan and little Joan, one after the other.

And this simple image, which is so poetic, perfectly describes the clear duality that an artist faces. On one hand, the artist in his or her workroom is obligated to live in great solitude, in order to be able to approach the unknown. It often resembles a bottomless abyss, but suddenly, brutally, it can become magic, it can clarify into something vivid

and alive. This is what Joan means when she talks about “riding a bicycle with no hands”. But on the other way, the artist outside of the workroom must spend his or her time making decisions, must accept the need to make social and professional connections with the outside world.

For Joan Mitchell, abstraction is not a style. She says, "I just want to make it so that a surface works. It's just a use of space and form, an ambivalence of forms and space. Style in painting is a matter of labels. A lot of painters are obsessed with the will to invent something. All I ever wanted to do was paint.
I had such admiration for the great painters. If you take a close look at a Matisse, the way the paint is laid down, and how the white is used -- I wanted to lay down paint like Matisse. I worked hard at that, a long time ago."

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It's true that if we go into a museum, and turn a corner and discover that we're suddenly face to face with a Joan Mitchell, we may feel the same impression as when we find ourselves in front of a Matisse. Suddenly the painting attracts us with its strength, its light, and also its extreme freshness.

The painting seems to be only just finished. Unlike the work of other artists, it doesn't belong to a finished era; you cannot date Joan's work. It's always about today. The fluid feeling between the colors, the freedom of the strokes of the brush, the extreme sensitivity of each brush-stroke ... it's almost as if the painting were breathing... were alive ... and we are overcome with jubilation.
And yet in Joan's paintings, amid this vibrant energy, there is often, in one corner of the painting, a storm brewing…

I'll try now to evoke her as a person, to make her re-appear the way I saw her, with a few memories, a few moments.

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The first time I met her was at the Ecole des Beaux Arts de Paris. It was probably some time in 1990. A painter who Joan and I both knew well, was doing a presentation of her work to the art students there. Several of her friends had come to give her our support; one of them was Joan. After the speech, a bunch of us got together for a drink in a café. I was seated opposite Joan. We began chatting and then when Joan learned that I was an artist she began to pepper me with questions.

It reminded me of the first time I met Louise Bourgeois, a few years earlier in New York, because she asked me similar sorts of questions when I told her I was an artist. I felt that I should be very attentive to everything I said. And then all of a sudden, I don't know how, Joan realized that my father was the composer and musician. She seemed to know very well about contemporary music.

But to my great surprise instead of having the usual reaction of most French people, Joan looked at me with great intensity and compassion. She said it must be terrible to have a father like that, both because of other people's reactions and because my father must have a very strong personality and was probably very authoritarian with me. She said I must find it very hard to make my own way in the world. She seemed really affected by this discovery, and she told me that she wanted to get to know me better and look at my work. She wanted to know how I was managing to deal with this difficult problem.

I was totally astonished. I had learned to avoid talking about my father, and I never brought the subject up in this kind of discussion. Especially in France, and at that time, in artistic circles it was considered very poor form to be the child of someone famous. My father was very well known in the 70s and 80s; he was like a symbol of a revolutionary musician. "She's a Daddy's girl", "she must be a snob" "...pretentious" "an idiot". Or else people addressed me as a messenger, someone who could be used to transmit things to my father; they didn't waste a second trying to figure out whether I wanted to do such a job or what sort of person I might be.

But then for the first time, when I was about 35 years old, I met Joan Mitchell, who in such a short space of time seemed to understand all about this, and wanted to have a natural and interesting discussion about it. Suddenly it all became simple.

To me this recollection reveals how very different and sensitive Joan was. She was always very attentive and curious about other people. And when she had something to say, she said it -- even if it clashed with the ideas you were supposed to promote at that time in Paris. She was completely aware that she didn't match the rather hypocritical conventions of artistic circles in France, and she knew that her frankness caused her harm.

8 Soon after this evening Joan came to my house for a visit. She came with a young artist. After showing them around the place I lived, I took them into the studio where I worked. After a while this young man began to explain to me what in my work was good and what was not.
With lots and lots of words he told me what I should leave behind me and what direction I would do better to go in. He seemed certain that he knew where the truth lay.
I had a sneaking desire to tell him I didn't really care what he thought about it, and I would have far rather heard what Joan had to say. But Joan let him talk.

And then she asked him, "How can you be so sure that you're right when you say all this? How can you know better than Mâkhi what she should be doing? What authorizes you to judge all this with words?" The young man fell silent; he was annoyed. And Joan got up and very carefully looked at all the drawings that were hung on the wall. She started asking me questions, and let me talk for a little, and then she said she felt at ease in the universe of my work, but it was difficult for her to explain why.

At the time my drawings were constantly transforming themselves. I made nests that became spiders that became faces. At one point Joan said, "You see, I like your heads and the look in their eyes – And in a tender smile she said; they remind me of my dogs."

I didn't yet know much about Joan's life, or about her attachment to her dogs, but I was overjoyed when she told me that. It felt like a great compliment.

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The question of what is said in front of a piece of work is linked to the question of what art teachers in general say to their students. Joan used to tell a similar story. When she was a young woman who wanted to be an artist, she went to art school, and discovered that her teachers told her "You must do this", "you must not do that". So she simply started going to exhibitions and meeting artists, and finally, after encountering their work, she tried to seek out De Kooning and Kline, who at the time were not at all well known.

This question of the path that a young artist is supposed to follow was one that Joan and I often talked about. I think she found similarities in the paths that we both had taken, and also in the relationships we both had with the authority of our fathers.
She liked me to talk about my childhood, and she would try to understand why my parents never reach accepted that I become an artist. Since my childhood, I was drawing and painting but my father thought that I have to be a great Mathematicien… he refused to let me go to Art school. He said I could just learn Art on my own, art wasn't something you could learn in school, but studying Math would always be useful.

I tried to comply…But after a few years, unconsciously, I had stopped mathematics and was spending most of my time painting … However, I felt that I hadn't structured myself properly, and I was too involved with a very French, very European kind of painting. I needed to be sustained by art that was more free and more contemporary. So then I left for New York, with David, my husband, in 1987, and for a year I felt like a car in the car-wash being scrubbed by a frenzy of big blue brushes! What incredible freedom there was in all this art that I could at last discover. De Kooning, Rotkho, Newman…. And Joan Mitchell…

10 For a year I destroyed everything that I made, and I fell into a deep depression. Then I discovered the work of Louise Bourgeois and it was a huge shock. I felt as if each new piece of work that I discovered was helping me to reconstruct myself, and to find my center of gravity.

So I tried to meet her. And that's how she basically saved my life, by accepting who I was and helping me find my path. Louise Bourgeois too liked to talk about childhoods and fathers. Joan and Louise both had the faculty of being interested in other people, their life-stories and choices.

Both of them were deeply curious, even about subjects that were very different from their own work.

For example, both Louise and Joan would often embark on long conversations with David, who is a research scientist, asking him endless questions about science and medicine. Both of them could be very sociable for a long time if they felt they were in good company. But if somebody upset them, both of them would just stop the conversation and go and be by themselves.

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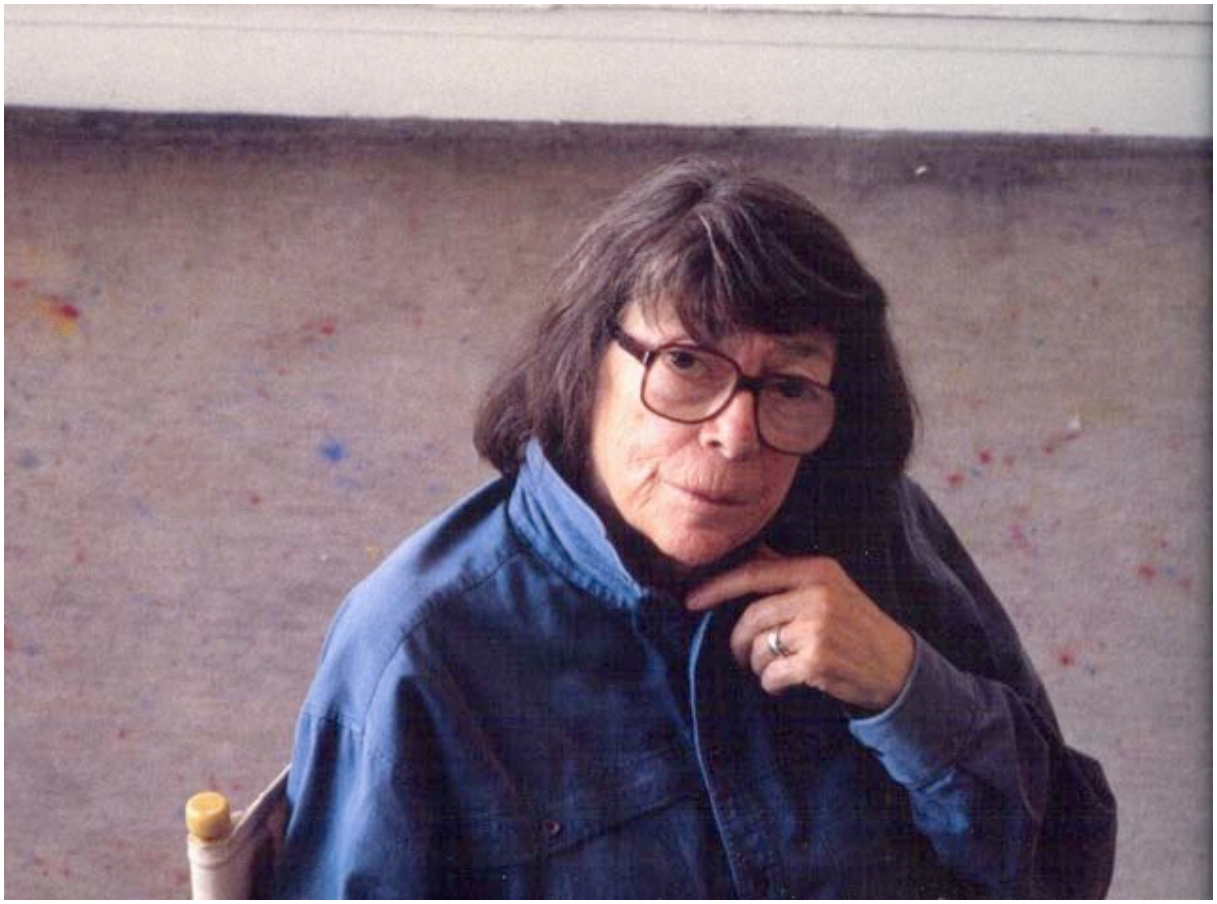
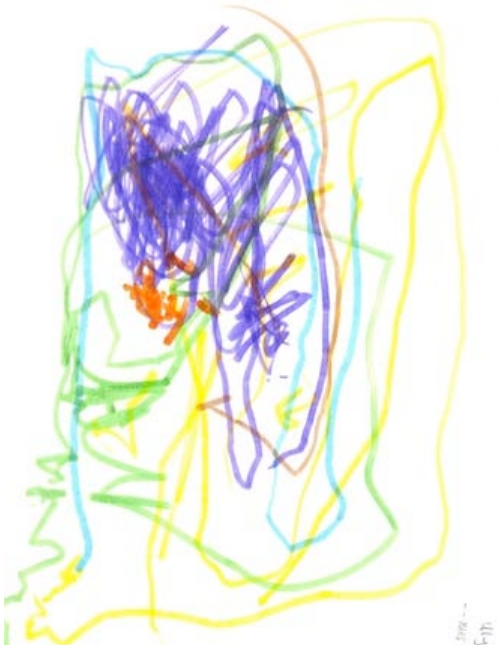


When David and I decided to return to France, in 1989, I was very sad to lose this real friendship that I had with Louise. And it felt like a real miracle to find, so quickly, another person, so strong and talented, who accepted a new friendship of this significance.

At 65, Joan was still curious to discover new people and to become friends with them. After only a few weeks David and I felt were really part of her group of friends, a group that always welcomed new people, especially young artists, and particularly women artists.



12 Joan also invited us to Vétheuil, where she lived. At that time our son Ulysses was about two years old, and to occupy him I used to give him paper and colored pencils. He spent his time covering white paper with big, colorful abstract marks, and in a way they made you think of Joan Mitchell's drawings…

13 Joan seemed very amused and interested by what Ulysses was doing, and after a while she sat down beside him and started drawing too. After a moment Ulysses took a look at Joan's drawing, and he said to her -- half-serious and half-joking, "No, that's not how you should do it, look at how I'm doing it." Joan wasn't just amused by this situation; she appeared to be seeking quite seriously to unlock something important.

When do a few strokes of the brush or the pencil become art? When do they remain just a pretty child's drawing?

All children that age do this kind of drawing, before they begin to depict people or animals. And these drawings contain great freedom, which will be lost in a few years because of the effect of school and social convention. But nonetheless they don't really express very much about us, or about the world.
Joan not only managed to reconnect with that great freedom of childhood, she nourished her work with a life full of thought and hard daily work. There was something separating the automatic scribble of this little two year-old boy from Joan's drawings, shining with life and mastery, and this element was a whole life of determined creation and talent. 15

There's the work of physical control, where the body and hand manage to express the desire of the artist better and better. And there's also the whole mental growth of a human being who discovers his or her own destiny and the inevitability of death. The drawings of a child of two, who hasn't lived through any major trauma, are created in an instant of pure life, careless of the future and therefore careless of death.

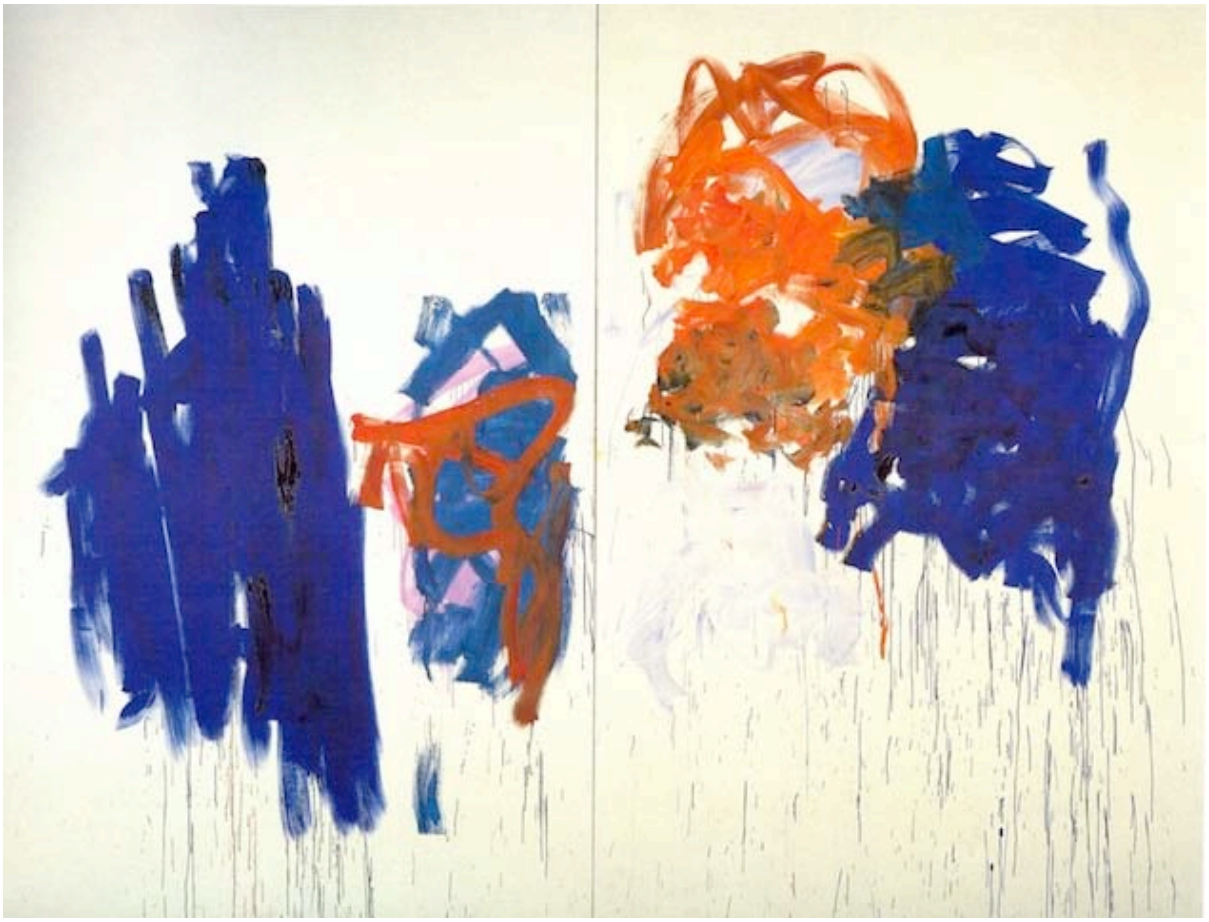
16 Joan was growing closer to death and yet all the drawings and paintings that she made that year rival each other in their command, their freedom, their energy and color. They contain within them the terrible gravity of death and of these moments of life that will soon be extinguished.

Joan talked about death. She felt her illness was bringing her closer and closer to it, though except for the last few weeks she did not know it would come so soon.

Is this why her final work seems so alive, so free? Unlike other artists, who as they feel death approach seem to become overwhelmed by it, so that it is absorbed into their work, Joan's last work emanates life and light, as if she were fighting death in a merciless one-to-one combat. It's as if, so long as she kept drawing, she would trick death, and ward it off.

Death won the match in the end, but her work is there, bursting with life, eternal.

How can we not pause in silence in front of one of Joan's last pieces of work - titled, precisely, "Merci"...



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I would like now to return to some recollections about a rather difficult question, which was very important to me at the time: the question of having children when you are an artist.

Joan Mitchell's reaction to this question totally surprised me, and it ended up being a decisive element in how I grew to become a woman artist.

But I need first to return to what my father told me, and what Louise Bourgeois said about this question.

My father, who as I said earlier dedicated his life to music, always told me when I was a little girl, with his great natural authority, that I should always be independent. I should make Mathematics… I should have many lovers, and I should never have children.

He recommended a model of the artist that was very common in his generation.

My father was born in 1922. And Joan was born in 1925.

18. They became adults just after the war, and they had to rebuild their whole lives with new rules, new laws and an impetuous desire for freedom and independence.

Particularly among young artists, the idea of family became unfashionable, empty. It was reserved for the middle class, who in French we call "bourgeois".

Having children meant regression and alienation.

One of the worst acts of disobedience I ever did to my father was when I was 18 and I fell in love with a young man: David.

I was of course allowed to sleep with anyone I chose, but I wasn't supposed to always sleep with the same person. So I began to lie, and invent a whole range of lovers.

Much later, to my father's great despair, I decided despite everything that I would go to live in New York with David for two years. We were beginning to build our adult lives; we were both about 30. David, who didn't come from a family of artists, told me more and more often that he would like to have children. Not one child, but children.

As for me, even if I told myself I wasn't supposed to have the right to have children, I too was beginning to want the same thing.

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Louise Bourgeois à Gramercy Park
avec son mari, Robert Goldwater, et leurs fils
Alain, Jean-Louis et Michel
1948

19 At the time I often went to see Louise Bourgeois in her house in New York. I was lucky enough to encounter her at a time in her life when she was very available, and we could spend hours with her, talking about all kinds of passionately interesting subjects.

Louise was born in 1911. She met Robert Goldwater when she was about 26. He was living and working in New York, and she decided to marry him and follow him there. Before she left everything in her life behind -- while she was still in France --because she couldn't manage to become pregnant, she adopted a little French orphan. And a little after her arrival in New York she became pregnant with Jean-Louis, and then with Alain. It was very rare at the time for a woman artist to have three children.

One day, when the two of us had been talking for hours, I took a deep breath and asked her the question. "Is it possible to be an artist and to have children at the same time?"

She looked at me with great surprise, and thought for a while. And then she said, "Of course, having children means you give a great deal of yourself. It takes a lot of time and attention. But my children never stopped me working. That's not what stops you working -- that's just “chichis”, fuss… Of course you can have children and continue making art."

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So I trusted her. And a little later, Ulysses, our first child, was born.

Now we get to Joan.

We were at her house one day -- it was probably in April 1992, because we had just learned that I was pregnant again. Not with one child, but with two: twin girls. I must admit I didn't know what to think about it. When we told Joan the news, she seemed very moved, very excited. It was the idea that there were two babies in my belly that seemed to fascinate her most. This was in April 1992.

After a while she asked me what I felt about it. And in fact it was all very confusing to me, going from one child to three. And really, I was totally disobeying my father. There were so many issues of scheduling, and organization. I knew about Joan's life and her choice. Like many woman artists of her generation, she had given her whole life over to her work. I was afraid she would lose interest in me as an artist, that she

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would think that I was going to give it all up. I was afraid she wouldn't like me any more. So I answered that I was worried. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to paint any longer.

She shook her cane in the air, and turned it around violently. She glared at me furiously.

"How can you say such a thing? How can you say this to me? Look at me! I'm alone, I'm getting old, I'm drinking - and why? Just because I fell in love with a man who didn't want children, who wanted to be the only person I would look after. And I wanted to give my whole self to art, and keep my great freedom. So what did I do with all that great freedom?

"A day is a long time. You can just work well for three or four hours. And that's fine, that's enough. You can do your work! Look at me. And make your children. Enjoy them. Continue your art and stop bothering me with this garbage ".

I listened to Joan. I never complained again. I had my two daughters and I blossomed in my work and my family.

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These anecdotes mean so much to me because it seems to me that in the art world today, this question is still not settled. And that's also why I'm talking about it here today. Even now, many young women artists still follow this very powerful dogma, without really realizing it. When they get to a certain age many of them seem to share a certain stunned sadness.

Of course I would never say that a woman is not fully realized if she doesn't have a child. Plenty of people, men and women, have made that choice without regret. But I find that there's still this preconceived idea about women artists, and that women's choices on this subject aren't always completely their own. And yet this doesn't seem to be true of women writers, or actresses, or musicians.

Now I would like to touch on another common point: exile. All three of these artists were exiles, and all three said they suffered from their exile. Yet wasn't it this forcible uprooting that allowed them to acquire their great liberty, their independence from the artistic conventions that ruled in their fields of work?

When they were cut off from their roots, and distant from the comfort of a familiar country where they could speak their mother tongue, the battle that they had to lead to construct themselves gave them that rare independence, and this meant that they created art that was completely singular and unique, so that we can immediately recognize it, without hesitation.

23 But the thing that seems so paradoxical, is that in order to construct this unique and resolutely innovative body of work, they all three turned back, and found their source in the roots they had lost.

Of course, these different exiles did not have the same motivations.

The man among these three had to flee his country during the war, because he had been sentenced to death for political reasons.

The two women each crossed the ocean to live with the men whom they loved.

But in no case were these departures chosen for strategic reasons, for their career. And in no case did these exiles continue struggling to make art for strategic reasons -- only because of the necessity of making another piece of work, again and again, in order to feel alive.

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My last memory of Joan is a particularly strong and moving one. We met again in Vétheuil before the summer of 1992. My belly was becoming large, and she asked me to let her know as soon as the girls were born; she wanted to see them right away. The summer passed, and on October 1 my daughters were born. I called Joan from the maternity hospital; she had a very strange tone of voice. She told me she had to go to hospital, but as soon as she got out she would come to see us.

A few days later we learned that she had been hospitalized at Institut Curie Hospital, and that things weren't going well.

As soon as I could leave my babies with someone for a few hours, I went to see Joan in hospital. At my first visit, she still had energy; she talked a lot, became irritable with the nurses, and told me how happy she was to be able to go and look as often as she wanted to at a reproduction of a painting by Monet which was hanging in the corridor right in front of the door to her room.

I was a little crushed by my sleepless nights and all my babies. It was a few days before I went back to see her.

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When I walked into her room I immediately realized, like all the people who visited her, that it would soon be the end. Many of Joan's close friends came and left in silence. It was a moment of deep sadness for us all. Everything seemed to be suspended. Everything had stopped.

For a long time I was permeated by what I saw in that room. I was stunned by how exactly death, when it draws closer to a person, creates in that person the same gestures and expression as a newborn.

It's difficult to describe, but a baby, when it is just born, can't yet really see. He or she searches for a presence more by nudging with the head. A baby's mouth is still like the mouth of a little fish, he twists it and opens it in strange ways... his hands still curve inwards, and he brings them up to his face with sudden, clumsy gestures... All these images and gestures were what I saw in Joan, who in her last days was no longer conscious.

It was as if death and birth had met. As if, in order to die, you have to return to the body and the gestures that you had at the moment of your birth.

Joan Mitchell, the last person who had helped me grow into my life as an artist, disappeared at the exact moment my two daughters were born.

It's always afterwards that you realize how important someone has been.

I will never forget how much she nourished me, and helped me grow. I will not forget how open she was, her generosity and her talent.

Plongeon de Joan Mitchell, vers 1935.

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Francis Picabia said, "For you to like something, you have to have seen and heard it for a long time, bunch of idiots".

And it's confirmed today for Joan's work - the more the years go by, the more we see that her paintings radiate life, force and freedom. The more the years go by, the more people realize how major this work is.

It's obvious that Joan Mitchell will count among the most important artists of her generation.

These few days that we're spending with her, and with her work, are important, privileged moments.

So I thank you infinitely for giving me this opportunity to participate in this Symposium.

Thank you.

Mâkhi Xenakis

Translation : Ruth Marshall

Mâkhi Xenakis is a French artist and author. She was born in Paris in 1956. While living in New York City in the late 1980s, she had a decisive encounter with Louise Bourgeois, which led to the publication of *Louise Bourgeois: The Blind Leading The Blind*. When she come back to France in 1989, she met Joan Mitchell and used to see her regularly until his death. She has published five other volumes edited to Actes-Sud. Her artworks are in the collections of the Fond National d'art contemporain, the Centre Pompidou, la Manufacture nationale de Sèvres, and the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris.
Site : http://www.makhi-xenakis.com/