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Oral history interview with Joan Mitchell,  
1965 May 21

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Joan Mitchell on May 21, 1965. The interview took place in New York, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler testing the machine in preparation for an interview with Joan Mitchell on May 21, 1965. This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Joan Mitchell on May 21st in New York, 1965. Joan, I remember that in years past that some of the imagery in your paintings had something to do with your childhood in Illinois. Is that Illinois?

JOAN MITCHELL: Chicago.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Chicago itself. I wondered if you want to reminisce about the early years and how you came to think about becoming an artist, what things in your environment, in your family or friends, whatever happened to you in your early life that might have tended to may you choose this direction rather than any other.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well, I used to go to the Lincoln Park Zoo and also to farms around the countryside, cornfields, and paint watercolors with my father from the time I was six years old I suppose. And he was a doctor and—but I think always wanted to be an artist and so I carried it on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He had been painting early in life?

JOAN MITCHELL: Not seriously, but he always drew. I still have his drawings. He's dead now. And they're very, like Lautrec, or along that line—sort of very French-y. And he'd take me to the Art Institute. And I loved painting. And painted all the time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did you begin? [Inaudible.] You were growing I suppose—[Inaudible.]

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, six, seven, mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY SECKLER: After you left school did you think of going to an art school or that kind of thing?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I was too young according to him to go to an art school. I was a year ahead, so I closed my eyes and went to Smith College and was miserable. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.]

JOAN MITCHELL: With 2000 women [laughs] and then I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you stick it out for a whole course?

JOAN MITCHELL: No. I only went two and then I packed my bags—by that time I was old enough—and got a scholarship to the Art Institute of Chicago and finished that. Then I got a fellowship and went to France. They give traveling fellowships—I came here first to New York, which I adored, then went to France, and came back here as quickly as I could.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there anything that happened in your training at this—in Chicago that was important to you, any particular teachers there that were inspiring, gave you a direction?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well, there were some inspiring teachers, nobody that's I guess well-known. I don't know what that means. But the best teachers aren't always the best painters.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What artists had you admired even before going to art school? I'm curious what you liked as a child, in the way of the paintings that you saw with your father and so on.

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, Van Gogh. Of course the Art Institute has such good Impressionists. Renoir, Van Gogh, Seurat.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you like Seurat?

JOAN MITCHELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And, uh, well, I like them all really. They have a divine print department. Later on—not when I was little—you could go in there and look at you know, Rembrandt, and anything you wanted to, truly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And working in Chicago there in your studies you were painting from the beginning, you knew you wanted to be a painter, it wasn't a question about the medium or anything.

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh no, no. But in high school—I liked school—and I remember the history teacher saying to me, "Oh, Joan, so too bad to waste a fine mind on simple art techniques." And I got so mad [laughs] but that's what I wanted to do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And what happened in France? You came back. You loved New York, but did you love Paris on your first exposure to it?

JOAN MITCHELL: No. [Laughs.] I was miserable and cold and the first foreign country I'd been in was Mexico. I went there two summers, consecutive summers, and painted.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What summer were those?

JOAN MITCHELL: '45 and '46. And, uh, I was nuts about Mexico, and I fell in love and all that sort of thing, but it was warm and it was beautiful and it was—and then when I went to France it couldn't keep up to this sentimental picture I had of Mexico. And it was right after the war and it wasn't easy to live, not that that matters so much. But I got sick, and I was shy and I didn't know anybody, and I didn't speak French and I was generally miserable.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were studying somewhat formally. You entered some classes not the—

JOAN MITCHELL: No, I didn't have to study. I just worked on my own.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOAN MITCHELL: I went—I came here, I lived here for a year before I went there and this teacher of mine called [Robert] von Neumann at the Art Institute said—told me to study with Hans Hofmann. I came here and I went timidly to his class and um, I was scared because I couldn't understand a word he said. And he would work—I adore him by the way—but he would work on students' drawings and say but it's not this way, the push and pull, it's that way, they were working from a model and yet the drawings were abstract and I felt I didn't understand anything. Several years later he came to me and said he liked my painting and really I was so [laughs] pleased. I would have liked to have gone but I was too shy and I felt I didn't understand anything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There was someone, I don't know whether it was Clement Greenberg or not, who developed a theory that the great effectiveness of Hofmann's painting was that really nobody understood what he was talking about but there was this great inspirational aura [laughs].

JOAN MITCHELL: Great, great feeling, oh yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He himself has told me many times that every time he ever heard back from a student his impressions of what happened in class that it was absolutely wrong. [Laughs].

JOAN MITCHELL: [Laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: You weren't alone in that feeling, in that thinking that you weren't able to follow it.

JOAN MITCHELL: Then I did get some of the students to explain to me, and they all had different theories—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of push and pull.

JOAN MITCHELL: Push and pull.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did this become an important element in your thinking about composing—

JOAN MITCHELL: No, no. I remember he had a lovely word which was monotonious other than monotonous, but I've always kept that in my head.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Well, when you were in France and you were doing some, you were working as well as going to museums and looking—

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh yes, I painted.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of things were you looking at, what sorts of subjects or what mediums?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well mostly, um, landscape, abstract landscape, however I guess I still work that way—

DOROTHY SECKLER: It looks basically abstract, but to you—

JOAN MITCHELL: It was much more, I suppose, Cubist, like the earliest works you've seen here. I don't know; it was white, but they weren't white.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was the paint already free in the way you applied it, with a sort of flux of brushstrokes and so on?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well it was actually freer earlier in, around, um, I think I went through a bad period in France.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You tightened up a bit, more Cubist planes?

JOAN MITCHELL: I don't know. I just was so unhappy and cold [laughs] my hands were so cold. I had no heat.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well this is an amazing thing, how many types, students who had Fulbrights and various scholarships in Europe, in Florence, and Rome, and Paris, they're main memory is of cold hands and feet [laughs] and never being warm enough.

JOAN MITCHELL: But then it was after the war and you couldn't get anything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course there was a particular reason for it then.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was wondering how you had happened to arrive at the style, freestyle, earlier, had you known any of the artists who later became prominent among, you know, the Abstract Impressionists—had they been friends of yours in New York?

JOAN MITCHELL: When earlier do you mean?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, before you went to Paris. You said you had a freer period before France.

JOAN MITCHELL: No that I meant a long time ago in Chicago.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh I see.

JOAN MITCHELL: Sort of young, sort of landscape-y, but realistic. So, no, I got to know, well, Kline I guess was the first known painter I knew around here which was around 1949. He hadn't shown or anything, and I saw his big black things—the beginnings of them—hanging on his brick wall in his studio, unstretched. It was fantastic. What a divine mess, really. [Laughs]. And I found de Kooning. I'd seen a couple paintings of his here and there and I'd wanted to meet him. He had an underground reputation but not known on the big scene.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was he doing at that time? Would you go up to his studio at that time, in the '40s?

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember what you saw and how you felt about it?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well the, uh, excavation period.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh yes, that was a great period.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes I felt a great deal about it. [Laughs.] Still do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Excavation. So Kline and de Kooning then after you returned from Paris, so this was several years then. When did you return, '46?

JOAN MITCHELL: '49.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh you were there quite a while then.

JOAN MITCHELL: I was there in '48 and '49. I think, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, anything else you'd like to—before we get you back to New York too firmly—anything you would recall about post-war Paris would be kind of interesting, I think, what the contemporary artists were doing there as well as whatever you thought about Picasso and the other Gods that were hanging around. Were

you feeling the need to be free of Picasso or was there, was this a part of your tradition, something you wanted to kick over very much at that point?

JOAN MITCHELL: No because this was—I didn't particularly want to kick it over because I was never that involved with anybody of—I was involved with Matisse or Cézanne but more modern. I adored Matisse, still do, so Picasso I think he's a great master or whatever—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't have to get him off your back.

JOAN MITCHELL: No, there were lots of younger people doing that and, you know, Picasso-esque things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you came back to this country after being in France did you have the feeling that what the artists here were doing, those that you saw pretty soon after you returned, was much more vital than what was being done in Paris or did you—

JOAN MITCHELL: I never separated them the way it's been done, you know, I just was so glad to be here because I adored this city. It was more the city than a specific—and I didn't know. I mean how did I know this lovely little group would form which became so disastrous later on? You know I just, I like the feeling of it here and I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you here in St. Mark's Place at that time?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, no, I wasn't. I was married and living with my husband which didn't last very long. I came here in about, let me see, about '52, I got this place.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, well I must have come down to see your paintings soon after you installed here.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I came down from *Art News* and you were having your big, big show, at the Stable, your first very large paintings. At least I think they were the first, the very huge ones—

JOAN MITCHELL: Wasn't it the second show, '54, I think?

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're probably right. Maybe my memory is—

JOAN MITCHELL: But the winter, '53, '54—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, you're probably right.

JOAN MITCHELL: I'm a little—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I should check back my [inaudible] years.

JOAN MITCHELL: I don't think that's the first show I had at the Stable.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maybe not. You don't want to wreck the record here. [Laughs.]

JOAN MITCHELL: No, no. Well it's easy to fix.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you came back then was The Club getting started that time you had—

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes. It was still on Eighth Street and I went there and there were about 40, 50, that's all, very few people. And I remember [Landes] Lewitin and [Phillip] Pavia who sort of ran The Club who were both very good friends of mine now looking at me sort of askance, what is this young girl doing here, should we let her in? [Laughs.] That was funny. But it was very—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were very young.

JOAN MITCHELL: I was young for that crowd, yes. They weren't sure I belonged and then the first Ninth Street show, de Kooning said my painting was alright or something like that so suddenly it was hung in a very good place. Whereas Castelli had been very unsure of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well you know, I was remembering a session at The Club that I attended, it must have been a little later I think, but the subject matter was something like "Accidents in Painting."

JOAN MITCHELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember you came—it was a winter night—with a big blue scarf thrown around your

neck. It was very sort of, you know, like one of those Ariste Rouen [ph] posters of Lautrec you know [laughs].

JOAN MITCHELL: How nice.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And I remember just at the end of the session of The Club you said, in a very spirited way, as there was discussion going back and forth, "You know there's no such thing as an accident in painting," and then you left very brusquely. So I assumed that the discussion seemed to have bothered you. I wondered if you remembered—

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I don't remember it particularly, but I don't think there is really. I mean you can—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think psychologists are apt to support your position but I'd love to hear from your version of it.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well unless you, you, try to do something, you make an accident and decide to keep that accident or use that accident whereas you get more proficient pushing the paint around, you know, what kind of a drip you want, if you want a drip or a fast line or something. I don't think there's any accident at all in de Kooning, or Kline, or Pollock. Uh, I don't know, actually [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Well, I agree with you as a matter of fact. In the same way if you make a cascade of drips, for instance, you don't know maybe exactly to the millimeter which—

JOAN MITCHELL: —no—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —drip is going which way, but you do know it's going to create a certain feeling of a plane in a certain place.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the direction of a line will be a certain way and you can reverse it if you prefer, the drip, reverse the painting so it drips the other way. Someone said for instance if a man crosses the street and is hit by an automobile it seems to be an accident, but in terms of the statistics of insurance companies, it was anticipated a certain number of men cross the street wrong and end up hit by cars and in that same way things happen—

JOAN MITCHELL: [Laughs.] Oh dear.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] You know, if you sweep a brush across paint with a great deal of speed, you may —there are certain things that you didn't exactly anticipate, perhaps that green would merge with pink at a certain point—

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, oh, on the contrary.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you know in general—you think you do know exactly?

JOAN MITCHELL: Not to the millimeter, as you say, but you do keep doing it until you get that mixture of the green and pink, I'd say.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then you can risk that big gesture.

JOAN MITCHELL: You, I think you know at what time you can risk it, or you can try to, at least, do you know what I mean? You're not just closing your eyes and hoping.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Exactly.

JOAN MITCHELL: Except—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —a very calculated risk—

JOAN MITCHELL: —when things are going, yes, when it's not going at all well.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you ever have a time when you just deliberately made a fault the canvas somewhere, just kind of made a great swath of paint somewhere that you really did out of anger or reaction, um, just because it was maybe a desperate thing and then that started in some way?

JOAN MITCHELL: No. I've done that when I was wrecking a painting to throw it away.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But never—

JOAN MITCHELL: No, never, never.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, to come back to that New York period of the late '40s, I wondered, uh, if you, if it might be a good idea at this point to establish what kind of thing you had—was it pretty much, were the paintings very white as a basic white as you were working into at that time?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, it was—I don't know whether you saw my first show in New York, which was at the New Gallery before it moved.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I did not.

JOAN MITCHELL: At the Algonquin Hotel before it moved. It was, well, in *Art News* they said it was sort of derivative of a Duchamp, the *Nude Descending The Stairs*, I never saw that in it myself, but more Cubist, less, um, and that became very linear after that with those white things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was that in shades of gray by any chance?

JOAN MITCHELL: The first show was in color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was? I seem to remember—

JOAN MITCHELL: And then the first show at the Stable—well there was one in color and the rest were pretty faded things, and um—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You hadn't in any case been thinking of the figure although they saw this Duchamp thing, I mean it wasn't—

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh no, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In those days when you began a painting, uh, was it a matter of beginning with the medium itself or some—

JOAN MITCHELL: Always been some sort of association.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We were just talking—you said there had never been any kind of painting without there being some association, something.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well when I have it's been pretty bad. I mean, if I have some sort of a feeling, it might even be some sort of feeling that I'm green or a remembered landscape or something like that. The feeling I had looking at a bridge or a river or whatever it would be.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you do a number of drawings when you're, um, outside somewhere wandering around?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, no. I do drawings in the studio.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So this is memory, then.

JOAN MITCHELL: I used to, I used to paint directly outdoors.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Up until your Paris period for instance would you have been doing—

JOAN MITCHELL: No, oh, up until about 1946, I guess.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So that you begin with a kind of a sense of a more or less place, more than anything.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, or a feeling about it or a, yes—it doesn't have to be—well, from my mother's house in Chicago we can see the lake and I love that lake. In the winter it can be very violent and I remember that I painted at least paintings out of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was something that meant a good deal to you when—well, while you were growing up so—

JOAN MITCHELL: —But even now, I go there at Christmas and I look at it and in February, March I might do something going back to the—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you ever, having begun with that kind of association or feeling, do you tend to hang on to it through the whole painting? Or should you ever—

JOAN MITCHELL: —the painting takes over, I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But does that ever completely depart from that or does it most often depart from it?

JOAN MITCHELL: Usually not, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It usually stays within the framework for some kind of feeling related to what you started with.

JOAN MITCHELL: Pretty much, yes. Unless another feeling—remembered feeling—gets in there, and then I change horses midstream, which happens I suppose.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But not often.

JOAN MITCHELL: Or on a lyric painting, a quote, lyric might not be working and I don't feel it and I make it into a completely different thing. Save canvas [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very interesting to me. Actually how you would begin with indicating on your canvas, uh, one or two or three major shapes that relate to your feeling about the lake. Let's take the instance of the lake painting for instance. How might a painting around that association begin blue [laughs]?

JOAN MITCHELL: [Laughs.] Or gray. I mean that particular lake seems to me always blue or gray. The cold, definitely cold, not a green type Mediterranean something. Bleak.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's like a feeling of time of morning or evening light, or anything like that, or seasonal light come into it in any way?

JOAN MITCHELL: It might. Certainly a feeling of light, a kind of light.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Since your painting is saturated with light I was wondering how specific the association would be.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I guess it's light I've seen but I do like paintings that have light in them. Um, it's an odd subject. I don't mean like [inaudible] or something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I understand what you mean, you mean colored light.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, Matisse light.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Van Gogh to Matisse light

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Kind of close to what seems to be in your paintings.

JOAN MITCHELL: I think, uh, Sam Francis has terrific light at times, certainly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The light seems to come out of the pigment primarily rather than to be a registered light falling on to something.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So then you might have a large area of blue or blue-gray and then certain, the shape in which the color is sent down would have a correspondence to your sense of the, uh—does it resolve a sense of faraway distance, or does it translate immediately into a large flat shape?

JOAN MITCHELL: Uh, no. I suppose all that's very hard because the lake image would involve other things. It would be broken up into shapes. I don't start with a large forms, it's smaller forms fitting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh do you?

JOAN MITCHELL: It may not look that way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Small parts that begin to talk to each other in some way?

JOAN MITCHELL: And in my last painting those closed masses started out smaller and closed in as I—that's what I wanted, but I don't start out with a big black thing and hit into it. It arrives at that. I sort of add on as a painter. I don't, um, I don't subtract, look back, the way de Kooning does a lot. I do sometimes, but—



DOROTHY SECKLER: There's a good bit of virgin canvas in the first hours of your working that—

JOAN MITCHELL: There's a good bit that stays, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh yes.

JOAN MITCHELL: You know, lots of—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Does it seem to you from the beginning, kind of a color key, if it starts all blue-gray does it stay all blue-gray, or do you arrive at blue-gray by starting off with yellows and oranges and then gradually—

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, no, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't overpaint much.

JOAN MITCHELL: I can overpaint but if it's—all things change, sure they do—but I never start out with yellow and orange if I want blue. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, a certain thing that some painters feel, you know, you have to build underneath with your light—

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh no, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you start, if you want a blue-gray painting you're working with blue-gray pretty much from the beginning and then using other things to foil to it as you go along.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is there any—while we're still talking pretty much about the career of the late '40s—how, uh, would you be doing several different paintings at the same time, or only on one until you finish up—

JOAN MITCHELL: When, in the late '40s? Then I always did one at a time. Now I work about, on, all the time, a year, over two years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now you'll have several going at the same time?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And gradually—

JOAN MITCHELL: But I can have a painting I'm not sure about. And I know if I turn it to a wall or get rid of it, maybe next week I'll have an idea rather than just put something on that I don't feel is—that I don't feel, just to put something on. I'll work on something else and go back to that and I think it works out much better. Once in a while I'll finish something all in one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You do?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh sure.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In a few hours?

JOAN MITCHELL: In one swoop, but not so often.

DOROTHY SECKLER: More or less smaller paintings would those be?

JOAN MITCHELL: I've done big paintings all at once.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You have?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh yes. But I'm getting older [laughs]—my energy.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't seem to have reached that stage yet, but I know where that comes to, I'll say that. That's always interesting to me to what extent artists work back and forth, and that thing of turning to the wall and coming back to it is certainly very important.

JOAN MITCHELL: You can be very, or I can be anyway, very discouraged on something but not realistically discouraged. I may not see what I have. So it's better to put it away and wait for another mood.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you—we were talking before about Hofmann and push and pull, and so on—when thinking about your conception of space, what would you feel the space—is there anything you say to yourself when you look at a painting and see what it has for you? Is there something like well it's working now because it has expanse or because it has—

JOAN MITCHELL: I haven't many words for that, I don't say it's working now, but I could show you why I thought it was.

[END OF TRACK.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I didn't want to rush us too far away from the last statement you had made that there are things you look for in a painting but there are no words or no particular phrases and so on. And I hope you'll come back to that when we can look at the painting and maybe see in a couple of cases maybe what it might have been. I don't want to stay forever on the period of the late '40s but it is a very fertile period in terms of what was happening for so many artists in New York at that time, having developed the need and possibility of throwing off the, well, European influence and starting out fresh and so on. And if this wasn't important, if what was happening with other artists wasn't important—except of course you've already mentioned Kline and de Kooning—but I think before we leave that period we might talk about whatever it was that was going on that entered into your work and whatever it was you thought was very unimportant.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I've always thought the—you mentioned the European American thing was unimportant—except that I remember trying to get a show and the dealer saying to me, "Oh Joan if only you weren't a woman and American, if only you were French and [inaudible] dead, I'd give you a show [laughs]."

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.]

JOAN MITCHELL: So it was that kind of thing I think the American painters, and with great reason, resented, more than European art itself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So it wasn't the art itself, that's interesting.

JOAN MITCHELL: And it was very hard to get a show. Um, the ideas that were exchanged, it was not so much at least the ideas, it was a feeling of this underground excitement. Everybody was poor—not that that's so heavenly—but everybody liked each other. If somebody sold a painting it was beers on the house and it was, uh, people were very generous to each other, the artists, which I don't think they are now. It's all this competitive, commercial, and so on, and that's—

DOROTHY SECKLER: When the artists became successful?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well, uh, so many people, not with all artists, so many people became involved with the art, hangers on, I don't know. So much has been said about—

DOROTHY SECKLER: But there was a genuine feeling about sharing ideas and you know the living—

JOAN MITCHELL: —And sandwiches.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And sandwiches and beer [laughs].

JOAN MITCHELL: Paying Kline's electricity bill, or—it was really such an exciting time. I have great nostalgia about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: At that time, uh, Kline had begun, uh, was by the end of '40s, showing, wasn't he? I'm afraid—

JOAN MITCHELL: —No, no his first show was in '51 or '52.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And de Kooning?

JOAN MITCHELL: Same.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Same. There wasn't a gallery that you felt you could turn to—even Johnny Myers wasn't, there wasn't anybody who was showing younger artists?

JOAN MITCHELL: Johnny Myers was.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He had worked with Grace Hartigan.

JOAN MITCHELL: He had worked with Helen [Frankenthaler], Grace, Larry Rivers, Harry Jackson, Jane Freilicher, Bob Goodnough, um, let me see, later, Johnny didn't like me then but now we're very good friends.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was really all beginning still in the '50s wasn't it? In the '40s there was no gallery, was there, [inaudible]?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well there was, while I was in France and really off the scene, there was Julian Levy with [Arshile] Gorky I guess.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember any particular, outside of Kline and de Kooning, or what happened—was there anything that happened in your work in a feeling, or let's say a liberation or a new way of being free in what you did after seeing the things that you did see of Kline's and de Kooning's?

JOAN MITCHELL: You mean did they influence me?

DOROTHY SECKLER: They must have.

JOAN MITCHELL: They must have but I don't quite know how.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They opened the door to certain things that people, you know—

JOAN MITCHELL: I didn't work like them, probably because I wasn't competent enough to [laughs] but some people did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well the great thing was that you didn't give up being yourself in the sense of keeping your sense of place or certain associational qualities that belonged to you.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That, you held onto those.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I tried.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Specifically freedom and the bold tackling of canvas.

JOAN MITCHELL: The, my boldest paintings were in Paris along with '58 and '59 or '60 even. That period was the sort of very violent period, which most of it is over there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We ought to at least get into the '50s since I've been keeping you so long in the late '40s, and, uh, the first important changes in that decade in your work and your showing which came along then, with the Stable, was it '52 was the first?

JOAN MITCHELL: I think so, and the New Gallery was before that and [Conrad] Marca-Relli showed at the New Gallery, and I did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where was that?

JOAN MITCHELL: The Algonquin Hotel, Jean Saul [ph]. He has a gallery now uptown and then there was Charlie Egan then, of course he was—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You showed with Charlie Egan, then?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, no I never showed with him. I would have loved to have.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh you meant Egan was another gallery that existed.

JOAN MITCHELL: Egan existed and Peridot existed. That was about all for this group.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was the reaction of the, well the press or anyone else at the time to the show at the New Gallery?

JOAN MITCHELL: I don't remember.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It wasn't crushing I take it since you went on—

JOAN MITCHELL: The thing I cared about was the artists' reaction and that was, I remember [Jack] Tworokov liked it and Elaine de Kooning liked it and [Esteban] Vicente liked it and I was very pleased.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And roughly what year would that have been shown at the New Gallery?

JOAN MITCHELL: '51 I think. It was after the Ninth Street show, the following fall.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, it must have been back then.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, '51.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then on the basis of the artists liking you I suppose it was easier to approach Eleanor Ward Stable.

JOAN MITCHELL: She approached me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh did she? That's great.

JOAN MITCHELL: Because there was the second Ninth Street show which became the Stable show, became, that was, she took four, I was the third artist she had so, um—

DOROTHY SECKLER: And some of the paintings that were in that first Stable show—can you recall them, just very briefly?

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] We don't need to go into a complete catalogue, but I mean just to sort of tag these as we go along, do you remember a couple things?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well they were very white, with lines, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you working into white paint as a base there?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, adding it in.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You never worked with underpainting a great deal. It was always direct?

JOAN MITCHELL: It was always direct, line with white on the side of it, on the edge of it, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you been much influenced by Mondrian at any point?

JOAN MITCHELL: I liked him very much. Strange, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I always thought the way you built spaces in paintings that I would see those, a couple of dark spots that would just arrest the planes in a certain way that would make me think that you had—

JOAN MITCHELL: I was, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —that it would have come out of that possibly but I didn't know, it didn't look like Mondrian.

JOAN MITCHELL: Very much. Cézanne, Mondrian, yes. You're quite right. Used to have him on my wall in reproduction, and the plus and minus period.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that was a great period wasn't it? So they were very white. There was a thing about whiteness for a few years in the early '50s I seem to remember. It had some sort of meaning to use white a great deal, I don't know quite why. It was a time also when the word pure was used a great deal if that had anything to do with it.

JOAN MITCHELL: It was?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, every so often when I was in the office at *Art News* someone would come in and say "That painting, that's really pure."

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, dear [laughter]. How interesting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then I thought maybe white was—

JOAN MITCHELL: —was pure?

DOROTHY SECKLER: But actually I suppose pure meant taking meaning out. In other words it was probably

equated with less is more and that sort of thing which wasn't too applicable to your paintings then because you always gave us a good bit in terms of movement. Had your, you know, any particular, anything else we ought to say about artists you felt close to during this period, or was it changing during the early '50s? Were there changes in your ideas about what, well, what you're meaning, the implications of what you were doing?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well, no. I like, I still like all those artists, I wasn't—some people of this, my generation so-called were trying to damn their peers or overcome or find new things. I never felt that way. I was quite satisfied in looking up to my elders, and I still do. I've changed gradually, you know I've changed from one painting to another to the next one sort of gradually. I'm fairly conservative [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Do you think of yourself as an action painter. Is the canvas an arena for action in the sense in which Harold Rosenberg is describing?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well, if it's big it takes a lot of physical effort but I've never—I will go back and look at what I've done, each stroke, step back and study it. So it's a lot of walking, [laughter] which is action.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I've assumed he's always implied that this was kind of an emotional, this arena thing, it was like, you know, each stroke was an answering to a previous stroke set down and an emotion discharge about the same time.

JOAN MITCHELL: I think some of that is true. Um, yes. I think the term as it was used at the time was alright. I think it's been misused or misunderstood, don't you?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I've come to have a kind of sense that a big gesture was the whole thing.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, with nothing more.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And regaining these moments when you step back and you are exercising your conscious judgment—and actually I don't think Harold himself was sometimes clear enough about the fact there's an alternation between these two processes.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I'm not sure he knows.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maybe he just hasn't really been close enough into the painter, he's closer to ideology.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, I think you'd have to watch a painter work. Most painters don't like to be watched.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I just sort of stopped a moment because I was remembering that—just by way of documentation of some of the work that we've been discussing in stages, there was an article by Irving Sandler in an issue of *Art News* around—

JOAN MITCHELL: '57 maybe?

DOROTHY SECKLER: '57, which dealt with the—

JOAN MITCHELL: —"Joan Mitchell Paints a Painting"—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —it was "Joan Mitchell Paints a Painting" and of course it would have been your current work. And then another article by Eleanor Monroe that appeared later.

JOAN MITCHELL: Uh, 19, uh, 1960 or '61, it was about a retrospective I had at Southern Illinois. It was on the cover of that issue. So you've been—

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that included some comment about the early painting at the New Gallery.

JOAN MITCHELL: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So we have that. And then of course bringing it up to date, there's an article by John Ashbury in the April issue of the *Art News* called "An Expressionist in Paris." I'm glad we could get that part, I'd like to have had a chance to look at a little later. But that will be helpful we can get the material together later and microfilm it for the gallery. Then to come back to the Stable shows in about that period and so on. Then in 1952, the early Stable shows, you had paintings which were very white saturated and they were fairly large as I recall.

JOAN MITCHELL: Always.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And at that time were considered painterly, but by 1956 the, they were much more

colorful, much more boldly colorful, and this was the period of course when the types of painting article by Sandler was in *Art News* and all of painting was a very curious title. Could you repeat that again so I—

JOAN MITCHELL: Well, the title is "George Swimming at Barnes Hole But It Got Too Cold." The reason for the title has something to do with what was my feeling, and I was rather depressed and had to think about something that I liked to get a feeling in order to do a painting, which is what we were talking about earlier. And about the only thing I could think about was my dead dog that I adored and his name was George. He was a poodle, and Barnes Hole is a beach and we used to go swimming all the time. So I could remember the beach and the dog swimming and the painting started out, it was quite yellow. It was summery, and it got bluer. That's why I added but it got too cold, so it got bluer and a bit bleaker, and perhaps by the end of the painting I was thinking I no longer have George so the landscape changed.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs].

JOAN MITCHELL: And I left the title because it was accurate and Irving wanted an accurate documentation of what I felt as I painted the picture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that one as you recall, was the painting, did your paintings at that time have a sort of plain structure that was pretty well maintained throughout the painting?

JOAN MITCHELL: Um, well, I think that it's still maintained but it's less done in a, um, in the earlier, you saw the last show, would you call it maintained when there are just plain white areas on the side? I think it's maintained but in a different way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I, I was thinking more in terms of, of, to what, how that entered into the process of the painting, whether that was something that was there from the beginning or if it was something that appeared at a certain stage and if it was developed, let's say.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well it's supposed to be there in the beginning but it isn't always. Then you work on it until you get it. You know, it's very nice if it would always be there but it goes away and comes back, um, I'd like it to be there, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you discard a painting or decide—or do you, do paintings sometimes fail?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh many, many, many. I have great morgues of paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There are some artists who don't, who never discard, who always go back—

JOAN MITCHELL: Would you like to see my closet?

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter]. Do you repaint at all?

JOAN MITCHELL: No. There must be about 500 paintings in this closet.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you work over them?

JOAN MITCHELL: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You start always then with a freshly stretched canvas, virgin?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, pretty much. I think that's, if I can, yes. Not always.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not always. Would you be apt to work on a painting—well we already said that you sometimes turn it to the wall for months perhaps, then you might take it out and work on it again. Might this go on for years or probably be within—

JOAN MITCHELL: Recently, the last two years it's gone on longer. Before it would be within a month. Now I, that painting it was in my show—um, that would be, which is a Battery production of it—but that I did when Kennedy died and I was picking around on it this last January, so that's the—but it was finished, I was just—

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was finished, largely finished—

JOAN MITCHELL: —largely finished.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you came back. And has this usually been something that worked to even, to add something?

JOAN MITCHELL: I do that more now. I think about it. I sort of finish them more, I don't get bored with them. I try

to make it the way I really want it. That, a triptych which is rather interesting, the center, that was painted last April, no that was painted last April. That was painted, oh at the same time, went into June that was done. And this I wrapped and made into another painting in January, this last January. So that's a painting that went over a long time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mean after this photograph was taken you wrapped it?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, no it's finished, it was in the show.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes I thought I saw—

JOAN MITCHELL: But that panel has been something else.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh I see.

JOAN MITCHELL: That turned into another painting, I painted the third panel in January, eight months later.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the painting *Calvi*, there's a very pressing massing of plane as opposed to the earlier, maybe I'm remembering—

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I did quite a few of those massing dark paintings in the last two years. In fact quite a lot of them that weren't shown.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think this was one of the striking aspects of the show is the possibility of doing this, of marshaling all those things in one form. Living dangerously in a sense.

JOAN MITCHELL: Clement Greenberg said there never should be a central image so I decided to make one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] I thought the central image was the whole new thing now.

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh it is. He used to say that. So I guess now I better open it up again.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well we've gotten up to the period of 1956, 1957. Had there been any interesting changes we should take note of in that period of your life? You had been living in New York.

JOAN MITCHELL: No I was living in Paris, half and half.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, you had been.

JOAN MITCHELL: I went to Paris in the summer of '55 to sort of get away from personal things, of course ran into other personal things and would come back in the winter and go back and each time I spent a longer time in Paris but that started in '55, my living in Paris.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you find the art world in Paris, or I don't know whether you were particularly involved with the art world in Paris?

JOAN MITCHELL: I never have been.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What aspects of Paris did interest you on your return during this time?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, in '55?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. What was it that kept you coming back? Other than personal things, perhaps.

JOAN MITCHELL: That was about all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It wasn't the city then and it wasn't French art. It was a personal tie that took you back.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's kind of interesting of course in terms of all the [inaudible], the dialogues that's been going back and forth between French and [inaudible].

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh yes. And I've had none of those, except in a way that it's worked out for the last four years. In a way I'm sort of glad I've been off the scene and just working without being involved in all these movements that's going on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And of course you weren't involved in movements in Paris as you were out of the art world

to some extent. Well, would you like to talk a little bit about Paris and the experience of just living there as an American artist even if you're not involved with the gallery world and gallery intrigue and politics and so on.

JOAN MITCHELL: I think it's a hard life [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: In what sense?

JOAN MITCHELL: Um, well I suppose it's hard to be an American there, although now I've lived there so long that I'm accepted. Um, there is a great feeling, I think somewhat created by the Americans, against American art. Um, just as there's a feeling here against French art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You felt that more strongly than—of course I've been hearing from people like Leo Castelli and so on that there's this enormous impact of American art through various galleries and they've been featuring people like [Jasper] Johns and [Robert] Rauschenberg and so on. This is something you didn't feel—

JOAN MITCHELL: —no, I didn't feel it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you think there's more that—and your feeling that the French artists had very complex feelings to say the least about the American art that was being shown there.

JOAN MITCHELL: I didn't necessarily mean the French artists. I meant the French in general, you know, not the French artists, um. I think in terms of French collectors that they're very, very conservative and they might have gotten up to Bon [ph] and dared to buy a very small Abstract Expressionist painting. And then after that so quickly following Pop and Op Art that proves to us that American Expressionism—so-called—wasn't very good either and so they're right back to Bon [ph] again. So the art scene is very dead there. It's been very bad for many, many painters. And the people that buy art in Europe are not necessarily French at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So the people that have been buying the Rauschenbergs and Johns and so on are either not French collectors or a very special species of—

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh, I didn't know they had been bought by French. There's some English, there's some Swedish.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Probably a good many other nationalities involved there, but it was the French, what you knew of the French as far as our tape is concerned that you're not speaking of American French artists because you weren't involved in any case.

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh well, I know artists there. We see a lot of Giacometti but he's hardly young, I know [Pierre] Soulages, some of the key painters I see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How do they feel about Pop and Op and so forth?

JOAN MITCHELL: [Inaudible]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course they had [inaudible.] as far as Op was concerned, and they had had their own brands of these things in a way. [Inaudible.]

JOAN MITCHELL: They had Duchamp, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. But they didn't seem to like it all, in spite of that [inaudible]. But anyway, not to spend too much time on other artists. While you've been living in France since '54, you've spent a great deal of time there since 1955, is there any way in which this residence abroad has affected your work? Would you assume that your work would have been different had you continued to live in New York all that time?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, well I mean nobody knows for sure.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Nobody knows for sure.

JOAN MITCHELL: Nobody knows for sure but I sort of carry myself with me, so to speak, my feelings with me, my own landscape or, um—and I've missed my friends here very much, but—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you missed the art world in New York City?

JOAN MITCHELL: I've missed the old art world that doesn't exist anymore and I don't miss the present one at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it the success that hit the artists that ruined, that took the—well, marked the end of the world you had loved in which the artists had a camaraderie and a sharing? Were there other elements that



entered into it?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I suppose so. The change, the fashion scene changing, you know this year it's fashionable to have something on your wall, next year it will be something else. You know, it's become like changing your clothes every year.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is that less true in Europe?

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, that I think so.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How do you account for that? Less, um—

JOAN MITCHELL: More conservative.

DOROTHY SECKLER: More conservative collectors?

JOAN MITCHELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Except look at Deuteron [ph] who's Belgian and dumped all his paintings because now he's buying [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

JOAN MITCHELL: At the auction last week, or three weeks ago, that I was in. And collecting has become such a speculation affair there are very few people who actually buy art because they want to keep it, look at it, that's always been true but—

DOROTHY SECKLER: As if now it's bought not only for investment but for conversation, it's an entree to a sophisticated set.

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh yes, and I don't know, it's like a chicken in every pot, a painting in every parlor [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Do you show your work in France at all?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh I've had shows there in, um, two in Paris, one in—

[END OF TRACK]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler continuing an interview with Joan Mitchell on May 21st in New York. May 21, 1965 in New York, in her apartment on Saint Mark's Place. Joan, I thought we might spend the last few minutes on this tape talking about your current show which is, um, at, is still at Stable, at the Stable Gallery. And it's an exhibition which is remarkable in many ways, um, and I would first of all like to hear you talk about what you, what set you going on the new, rather more massive, um, um, patterning—I don't know patterning isn't the right word—but the sense of large, looming shapes is one of the impressions this show left with me. And then of course there was that wonderful series of small paintings, each one gems of, you know, here Matisse, your love for Matisse—I mean not that they're like Matisse at all, but I mean the color thing is so brilliant there. But let's start off with the large type of thing.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well about two, I don't know, about two and a half, well it'd be two summers ago, one, two, this will be the third, two summers ago, I was feeling very, sort of, down about painting for some reason and without a feeling of a landscape as I talked about before, I was in the south of France and I saw this cypress tree against an ochre wall—and actually it was a chapel wall and way in the distance were the mountains and so on and so forth—and the cypress tree was so black and the ochre wall was a pale, pale ochre and it moved me, so whatever that means. And I started off and that lasted me for a long, long time on, this *Cypress* series. And then I did another series of blue trees, there were only two that were shown in the show, and the little ones came something out of that. That's an example of sort of how I work although it gets translated into something else.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you take that very impressive painting we were just looking at and reproduced in *Art News*—

JOAN MITCHELL: *Calvi*.

DOROTHY SECKLER: *Calvi*.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well that was the next to the last of the sort of so-called—*Calvi* is a town in Corsica—that has nothing to do with the painting. That just happens to be a town I like very much. So that was painted, um, after a series of very sad events including lots of dead puppies and Kennedy dying and a young child going away and everything and a friend of ours had a broken arm, just a hideous week [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Calvi. I'm sort of curious about whether it would be your way of working that changed a great deal by this time. This was painted apparently in 1963. It's a very large painting, 96 and 3/4 inches it says here, and, um, how would you have begun this, Joan? What would have been the first stage, the first kind of thing you would have put down here? Do you have any recollection of it?

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh well I would work somewhat in the mass and develop around.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was this a mass of greens originally?

JOAN MITCHELL: No, no, that's a bad reproduction. It's quite dark; it's a very dark green. Um, oh God I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was this, these touches seem very nervous, very tense and nervous, and spiking in a sense, would they have been part of it from the very beginning?

JOAN MITCHELL: The idea was have been part of it from the very beginning. Some of them were there but the—

DOROTHY SECKLER: From the beginning you had a sense of these high, looming mass, high in painting it.

JOAN MITCHELL: The things I had trouble with, I remember, were this left edge here to make it work and some of these parts, some of that up there, this to make it hard and biting as you said. I worked very slowly on that, I'd pick on it, every now and then make something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It almost at times has a suggestion of a brooding hen, but I'm assuming you didn't think about that [laughs].

JOAN MITCHELL: Oh no [laughs]. Don't see a hen in it; if you see a hen in it, I'll never look at it again. Oh dear.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It works amazingly. It's very difficult to see how one can make such a great brooding mass and such a dark, rather dark somber tone, with green and some blues and some touches of warm color to stay in space that high [laughs] and still somehow not drop out.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well I want it to hang there, still kind of flat.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh it does. And there were a whole series then that had somewhat the same, that had the feeling of the cypress tree?

JOAN MITCHELL: Well that was really a cypress gone a little off the—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —yes, there's really nothing in the shape of a cypress in it. It's a massive shape rather than a tapering shape of a cypress.

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did any of the others have a more cypress-y shape?

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, perhaps, well I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would that have—well in the beginning do you tend to think more relatively literally of the shape of a cypress and then gradually move into including—

JOAN MITCHELL: Perhaps it was the feeling. It wasn't so much the shape. It was this dark—and that I was caught by it sort of moved the way one might be by music but moved by this particular very dark thing and this pale wall. You know, I suddenly felt something from this image.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So the feeling takes over rather than the image of a tree?

JOAN MITCHELL: Yes, remember I told you, it wasn't the image of the tree it was the moment. This is very hard to describe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well I think you make it very clear. That's just what we needed to get on the record.

JOAN MITCHELL: But it's very corny. It's a straight visual experience unlike—I mean it's not at all intellectual unlike Duchamp or something, I think that's mentioned in that article; I'm a visual painter [inaudible]. I've, sort of, enjoyed looking and I know that's not very profound to some people [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm personally very grateful for that looking.

JOAN MITCHELL: I get my kicks that way shall we say. And he quotes that in here, oh well here he quotes me, well maybe you should turn that off for a second.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I had said it seems to me that a less weakened artist, young artist, they come along and feel the validity of an expression that has a link with nature in the sense of something seen. We had been talking about cypress trees and a series of paintings that came out based not on the image that looks like a cypress tree, though it perhaps keeps certain reference to deep colors, but simply retaining a sense of the presence, image, feeling, evoked, um, by a moment of something seen that if you break that connection—then what frightens me is the cost of art in which there would be nothing but stripes and dots and pulverized geometries. And we see it so much in Op art specifically so that it does, although it's difficult to establish the, what happens between something seen, and something felt, and something getting on the canvas, it seems to me to have a certain worthwhile thing in trying to do it, however lucid it may sometimes be. And you were saying that you aren't excited by dots and stripes.

JOAN MITCHELL: Well, no, I don't like to look at them. That's the trouble. But, one, I have astigmatism so I can't look at them, but they bore me and I like looking at things. I can get more pleasure looking out my window than at a dot. I love looking out my window, I love looking at landscape. Just very boring, like looking at a picture book when you're a kid, looking at anything. It's the, um, complementary colors don't, I can put up a color chart, you can too, all of us. I think it's more of a, it's a visual gimmick but it's also more of an idea gimmick.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes the ideological art, and the art it displaces is an art in which there was another kind of thing, physical sensibility, is that what it's called?

JOAN MITCHELL: I don't think it displaces it [laughs].

DOROTHY SECKLER: I hope not [laughs]. It really has the [inaudible] stripes, but that's wrong, I mean really the truth is that for certain arts, you will be working with geometric areas. The sources probably also can be something as easily remembered in nature as well as a taxicab [inaudible].

[END OF INTERVIEW.]