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ART

Last Spring

JOAN MITCHELL's final paintings (at Robert Miller, 41 East 57th Street; through May 8) convey the ferocious vigor of a teen-age bacchante. Her characteristic stabbing, swooping, skittering brushwork is as animated as it ever was in these nine works, all from 1992. Their startling optical clarity, due in part to the artist's deep understanding of yellow—she taps into its biliousness and coldness, not just its warmth—suggests the hard sunlight of early spring, as well as the twilight of the soul.

Mitchell, who died in Paris on October 30 at the age of sixty-six, finished the paintings during the earlier part of the year, evidently in a kind of vernal mood. She painted them in Vetheuil, a village in Monet country (though she was not one of those who drew the obvious connection). She had bought a house and the property there in 1967, with money from a trust set up by her grandfather, a prominent engineer. Mitchell was a Chicago girl from a good family, as she never tired of pointing out. She also never failed, however, to remind people that she had attended Francis Parker, an academically rigorous rather than a merely posh school that had many high-powered scholarship students. The artist took particular delight in her youthful acquaintance with a certain Nancy Davis, the doting stepdaughter of a Chicago society surgeon, who would later become the lady-in-red of the Reagan White House. Mitchell was no Republican. She was undoubtedly obnoxious. She was a conversational wrangler of lunatic proportion, a cranky old baby. But paintings like these should insure her a long and radiant afterlife. (A documentary about the artist, "Joan Mitchell: Portrait of an Abstract Painter," is being shown at Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street; through April 27.)

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St.—"Daumier Drawings" is the first major exhibition devoted specifically to the drawings of Honoré Daumier (1808-79). Daumier was a working artist in the modern sense, a lithographer by trade and a savage pictorial satirist whose lampoons of King Louis Philippe once landed him in jail. The show contains more than a hundred of his caustic masterpieces, including "The Drunkenness of Silenus," "The Legislative Belly," and the saturnine "Doctor Prunelle." Through May 2. . . . "The Greek Miracle: Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy, the Fifth Century B.C." Forty-three statues, stelae, busts, and figures from the fifth century B.C., including such archetypal works as the "Kritios Boy." Through May 23. . . . "Paintings from fifteenth-century China, in 'Painters of the Great Ming: The Imperial Court and Zhe School.'" Through May 2. . . . "Splendid Legacy: The Havemeyer Collection." More than four hundred and fifty works—Islamic pottery, Tiffany Favre glass,

Manets, Monets, Degases, et cetera—from the Havemeyer family's modest agglomeration. . . . "The Waking Dream: Photography's First Century" features rare prints from 1839 to 1939. . . . "The New Costume Institute's first show, 'Infra-Apparel,' puts into perspective the phenomenon—not at all confined to the present day—of underwear worn as outerwear. This show ranges from a white American Empire-style day dress (circa 1799)—which would make the wearer look to us like chastity incarnate but to Victorians as if she had just got out of bed—to the gold-sprayed satin corset worn by Madonna in her "Like a Virgin" video. In between are designs by Balenciaga, Fortuny, Lagerfeld, Versace, you name it. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:15, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 8:45.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, 11 W. 53rd St.—"Max Ernst: Dada and the Dawn of Surrealism" comprises two hundred and thirty paintings, relief sculptures, collages, drawings, and prints. Through May 2. . . . "Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys." Beuys' most visually arresting, graphically self-contained works tend to be called "Untitled," while the more humdrum, pictorially helpless pieces tend to have elaborate titles, as if to justify them ("From the Intelligence of Swans," "Eurasian Staff Against a Clandestine American Alliance for Aims of Political Power"). "Untitled" (1955), one of the few drawings here in which color, in the usual sense, plays a role, is a kind of dusky, depressed Marin landscape, hovering on the borderline between abstraction and representation. "Untitled" (1963) is a simple, distilled Albers-like composition—a rectangle of folded bright-red tissue paper above a square of rough brown wrapping paper—which would attract attention from fifty yards away. The most beautiful work in the show is "Untitled" (1957), a densely entropic concentration of marks made with pen-and-ink, machine oil, flame, and *Beize* (etching acid), grounded by an angry, light-devouring zone of black electrician's tape. The piece is an instance of a kind of neurological Fauvism that has got hold of any number of artists since mid-century, an exaltation of the materials of art and of the exact nervous forces at work in the artist as he or she employs them. Beuys was one of the first. Through May 2. . . . "Thresholds/Santiago Calatrava: Structure and Expression." Calatrava's drawings and scale models seem at once organic and futuristic. Among the architect's projects documented here are viaducts, bridges, and railway stations realized throughout Europe; the Spanish pavilion from last year's World's Fair, in Seville; and the model for a "biospheric" addition to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Through May 18. . . . "Photomontages by Dadaist John Heartfield and photographs by Philip-Lorca diCorcia. . . . "Projects: Readymade Identities." For a few hair-raising seconds, you think you've stumbled where you don't belong—and, essentially, you have—when you enter Sonia Balassanian's "The Other Side, II," an intelligent, satisfying, and unsettlingly resonant installation made with the simplest of materials—mannequins, fabric, floodlights, and mirrors. It's like turning the corner into the headlights of an oncoming subway train. Through May 18. (Open daily, except Wednesdays, 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 9.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, Fifth Ave. at 89th St.—"Picasso and the Age of Iron" contains more than ninety works, by Picasso, Alexander Calder, Alberto Giacometti, Julio González, and David Smith. Sculpted iron, bronze, brass, and steel seem particularly suited to the austerity of the Guggenheim. As you wind along the ramp toward the summit, past Smith's arc-welded abstractions, González's woven rods and ribbons, and Calder's fragile mobiles, you find such masterworks as Picasso's Cyclopean "Head" (1964) and Giacometti's delicate, life-size "Capsizing Man" (1950). Through May 16. (Open daily, except Thursdays, 10 to 8.)