

'I sing my sorrow and I paint my joy'

Joni Mitchell found fame through music, but serenity through painting. In an exclusive interview, she talks of the obsession behind the art in her first-ever Canadian show this month

DEIRDRE KELLY
The Globe and Mail, Los Angeles

She's standing in her sitting room — your first clue that nothing she does is according to convention — and, talking a mile a minute, lit cigarette jabbing the air for emphasis, singer-songwriter **Joni Mitchell** makes this declaration: "I am a painter."

What's more, she has always thought of herself as one, despite the albums, the accolades, the awards that have showered her like confetti on a bride.

"All through this," she relates in an exclusive interview, "I have always thought of myself as a painter derailed by circumstance."

Of course, it's her music that has made her rich and famous, and it's as a musician that the world is most comfortable in describing her. Painting has been a constant companion to the music and songwriting, but that side of her oeuvre is not as well known because, aside from a handful of international exhibitions, Mitchell has rarely shown her work.

True, she hasn't exactly hidden her painterly side. Fans know that her own illustrations and paintings have adorned most of her albums, beginning in 1968 with her eponymous debut, and continuing through to her latest, *Both Sides Now*. But she has never exhibited in her native Canada. Until now.

Starting June 30, the Mendel Gallery in Saskatoon — the Saskatchewan city to which Mitchell moved when she was 9 and where her parents and boyfriend, singer-songwriter Don Freed, still live — will unveil the first Canadian exhibition of her painting, voices: Joni Mitchell.

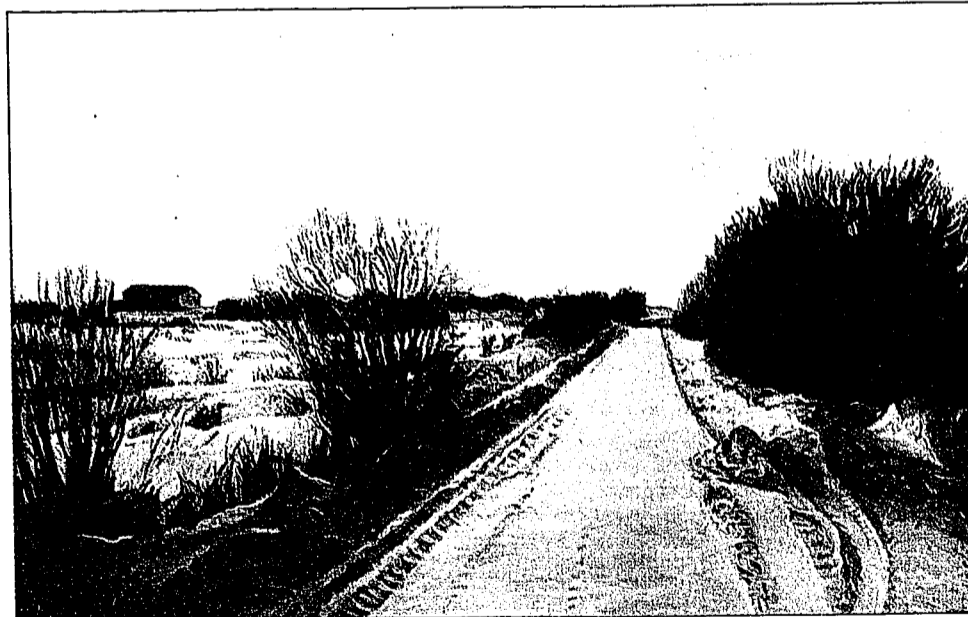
Devotees are coming from as far as Australia and South Africa. The New York Times will review the show. Galleries across the country are begging Mendel director Gilles Hébert, who thought up the idea, to let them in on what promises to be a blockbusting affair by offering the show up for tour after it closes in September.

Nothing has been finalized. Mitchell wants to see how the show works in Saskatoon before she even considers letting it go on the road. Before the opening, she's suffering what resembles stage fright. This spring she has been agonizing over the selection of paintings for the show and demanding a veto on the contents of the limited-edition catalogue to which she has contributed a 1,500-word statement.

"What I think people might find interesting," Mitchell says, "is that it is not often you find somebody who expresses themselves with regularity in three arts."

An interview with Mitchell is an event. This one occurs in two locations. The first is at the Daily Grill in the Brentwood area of Los Angeles, where Mitchell has her breakfast almost every day around 3 p.m. She typically starts with a bowl of soup (lentil, the day of our chat), followed by eggs, toast and salad — most of which she only half-eats because she always seems to be firing up one of her American Spirit cigarettes. Mitchell is such a regular at this haunt that on occasion "crazy fans" have called her there on the phone.

The second is at twilight, at her \$6-million Bel Air mansion. She calls it "the hacienda" because of its tiled Spanish-style roof, interconnecting rooms and salmon-pink exterior. The scent of orange and lemon trees pervade the air. A Mercedes sports car and a Land Cruiser sit in the driveway. Inside one finds a Haida "welcome bear," solid-



wood antique furniture, her own paintings, a cabinet crammed with CDs. Cats with names such as Nietzsche, Mojo and El Café are everywhere. On a coffee table, there's *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, *People* magazine, *Architectural Digest*.

Any understanding of Mitchell's career is incomplete without an assessment of her visual art, which, while not as celebrated as her music, is nonetheless an integral component of her sensibility. On the one hand, she is a pop diva and music innovator who has sold millions of records worldwide; whose songs have been recorded by talents as diverse as Judy Collins, the Byrds and Nazareth; who, at age 25,

wrote the anthem for the Woodstock generation and established herself as a rock poet that many have emulated but few have surpassed. And on the other, she is a self-described devotee of van Gogh and Matisse, who, in a backroom of her mansion, toils nightly developing imagery gleaned from the rural roads and plains of the Prairies.

"Because I'm so busy and because I think of myself as a painter, I desperately guard the time that I have to paint," she says. "And sometimes I'm irresponsible to my career in order to paint. Because painting is obsessive. I forget to eat. I forget to sleep. And a lot of times, the painting idea will come along at



Clockwise from above:
Axilar Moonrise (1997),
oil on canvas

Black Orpheus #2 (1985),
acrylic on canvas

40 Below 0 (1995), oil on linen

Turbulent Indigo (1995), oil on
linen, a self portrait used on the
cover of the CD of the same name.



is perhaps the more precise term — brim with bits of philosophy, chunks of cultural analysis, swatches of anecdotes about the lives of the great artists whom she has studied intently as part of her own process of growth as a painter. There's also a great deal of talk about herself, which is to be expected from someone for whom the personal is the essential component of her art. In fact, "no art that isn't personal has any vitality," she pronounces.

Painting and music are complementary components of her sensibility. Her songs are born of tribulations both endured and witnessed in the world at large. "I am plagued with involuntary visions of the blight that we are, this species on the planet," she says. "I've been cursed with this vision of scum at the water's edge, which gets in my music."

What she has suffered also gets in — broken relationships, "love's illusions" — and the loss of her only daughter, Kilauren, whom she put up for adoption in 1965 when poor and living in Toronto. "It wasn't until I gave up this child and made my bad marriage [to American folk singer Chuck Mitchell] that I began to suffer enough, which is the only thing that ever made me write — seriously write, secretly write. And the music kind of joined it."

Painting, on the other hand, is her sanctuary. Though she has lived in California since 1968, Mitchell has rarely painted scenes from her life in Los Angeles. The images in her painting are of the Canadian landscape and of loved ones, including her cats. Utopian and grime-free, the painting is the direct opposite of the strife-ridden music.

"I sing my sorrow," she says, "and I paint my joy."

Just as her lyrics have about them a diary-like intimacy, her painting lays bare the dreams and desires of the woman who created them. Each is a subjective document with a private vocabulary of images and symbols that she has taken pains to evolve. "It's not just arbitrary imagery," she continues. "All of it is truly attractive to my spirit, all of it is authentic to my personal history."

She was born Roberta Joan Anderson on Nov. 7, 1943, in the small town of Fort Macleod in southern Alberta, the only child of a former grocery manager and his teacher-wife. She grew up in rural Canada, lonely and hemmed in by the conventional thinking of her Prairie communities. Her sense of herself as an outsider was heightened by a childhood attack of polio that almost left her crippled for life. "It took away my athletic speed and my ability to compete and also set me back from being chosen for teams early and not being able to participate. It gave me a social handicap in the community that I was growing up in."

She developed into an introvert who sought refuge in the thicket of her lush imagination. She was thrilled by rich, jewel-like colours, and as a child used to collect the crepe paper left over from parades and dissolve it in water that she stored in decorative shampoo bottles. Art, from an early age, was alchemy. It turned the drabness of her small-town existence into gold.

Writing was also a calling, though she felt no compulsion to develop it. "Winged words flow from her pen," was what someone wrote in her high-school yearbook. So the talent was there and evident to others, even if she didn't give it much importance, at least at first.

Please see **JONI** on page **R4**

The glorious obsession of Mitchell's art

Music was a moment of rapture. She recalls being enthralled at the age of 7 by a recording of Rachmaninoff playing *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*. She begged her parents for piano lessons. She was a natural, and could play by ear. But her teachers strapped her hands for straying from the rules. "So pain drove me out of music. I didn't think it was worth getting beat up, you know? And they didn't understand my desire to compose either. 'Why would you want to do that,' they said, 'when you could have the Masters under your fingertips?'"

Defiantly independent, Mitchell learned early to follow her own path. She retreated frequently into nature, perhaps because it represented the call of the free. Pleasure she found in her own company and a couple of smokes on a sun-dappled Saskatchewan day.

"Oh, it would raise my spirits," she says, excitement rising in her amber-toned voice. "I'd get three cigarettes and I'd ride my bike on into the country and find a place that made me go, 'Ooh, pretty,' and I'd sit down and if it were autumn I'd look at the colours and the light through the leaves hanging over me. It gave me a sense of peace to watch the birds fly in and out."

The memory of those days on the Prairies has had an enormous impact on all her creative endeavours. She feels compelled to put the landscape into much of her painting. In conversation, she becomes tremulous describing its severe beauty. But it's not just a matter of

the picturesque. Mitchell paints the land because for her, geography is autobiography.

The pull of Canada is enormous. She travels at least twice a year back to Saskatoon, the place she still calls home. And she owns land just outside Vancouver, where she retreats to write. Her daughter, with whom she was famously reunited in 1998, lives in Toronto with two children of her own.

But besides her loved ones, Mitchell returns to Canada because the lure of the familiar inspires in her an urge to create. Picasso felt this way too, she says. "Every time he would go back to Spain he would get a new period. That reacquaintance with where you come from seems to spur something on."

She travels with a camera and sometimes a Super 8 with which to record the land. Back in Los Angeles, the photographs serve as models for paintings, or sometimes form the basis of collages in which she superimposes self-portraits onto the wheat fields. These latter works, in particular, show how strongly intertwined her sense of identity is with the land.

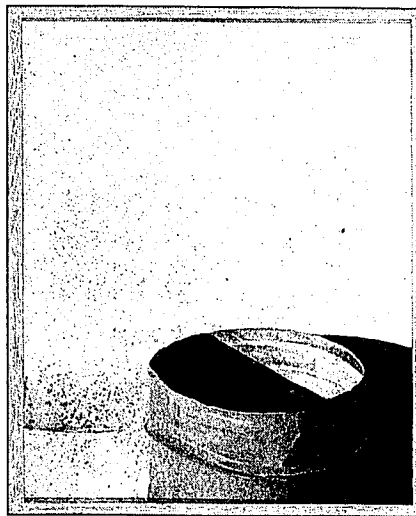
Saskatchewan's wide-open spaces have instilled in her a love of poetic exaggeration and exploration, while reinforcing a sense of identity as a trailblazer. "I come from sky-oriented people," she says. "I come from pioneer stock, developers of the West, people who went out into the wilderness and

set up home with nothing but a pair of oxen." That's her lineage and she continually pays homage to it by refusing to play to the mainstream: "I'm not a joiner. I've never been a joiner."

This is most evident in her music which, throughout a 35-year career, has taken many unexpected turns. She has known glory and she has experienced isolation for being so willful, self-assured and eclectic. Still, music has been a well-paying vocation that has allowed her to paint without feeling compelled to pander to the politics of art-world commerce. "I enjoy living with it," she says. "It's very personal — my friends, my cats, my antiques. Because I don't have to deal with the art world, I can paint what I want."

Past exhibitions of her work have had mixed reviews, largely because someone of her celebrity is always assumed to be a dilettante. "It's very shocking," she allows. "It's a love-hate thing. The hate is obvious. People think I get shown just because I'm famous. So there's natural resentment."

But Mitchell insists she is "no Sunday painter. I probably spend more of my time painting than most of my friends who are full-time painters."



Georgia O'Keefe's Rainbarrel (1978), mixed media (acrylic) on canvas

Most of that time is spent re-touching, reconfiguring and re-thinking her imagery. This nitpicky side to the painting process goes hand-in-hand with a mystical dimension that is full of visionary moments in which images appear, uninvited, onto the canvas. These she often crosses out, or colours over, in an attempt to wrestle back control over her painting. The

viewer is unaware of the suppressed imagery. But Mitchell says she can't look at one of her works without recalling the layers of meaning hidden beneath the surface picture.

This stratified approach to art-making is present also in her music. She is not one to write a simple melodic line, or cast her songs in either a major or minor key. There is no either/or in her music; it is all and everything. "Not quite mud," she says. "But some of those chords when you write them out look like mathematical equations." Overdubbing in the studio adds more layers to the music. The desired effect is what she calls "internal twisting," a helix-like structure of sound with its own tornado-like force. But the overall impression is more subtle. The musical colours, like the hues of her palette, are smoky and muted, the result of mixing many different tones at once.

The music, songwriting and painting are linked in other, intricate ways. "In the beginning," she says, "the music had a lot of grace notes, a lot of curlicues, and the writing had two adjectives where one would do. The art I was doing at the time was very Aubrey Beardsley, a lot of interlocking forms on a page. One day I got sick of that and

I said to a sculptor from Montreal, a friend of Leonard Cohen, I am sick of my drawing. It's too noodley, I said. It's too ornate and it's too girly. 'Draw me and don't look at the paper,' he said. It was a simple art-school trick. But it was just the device I needed to break loose. With that minimalizing of the line, the adjectives fell simultaneously from the writing and the guitar stroke went from less intricate finger-picking to a bolder strumming style, which was less classical and more pop-ish."

Starting in the early nineties and continuing today, Mitchell has felt a need to return to classicism to reinvigorate her creativity: "I needed to go back and really revisit classicism again, and look for another route out of it, musically and painterly."

And so she continues to work hard at a time when other artists of her age might allow themselves to rest easy after such a fruitful career. But Mitchell doesn't know the meaning of quit. Back in her sitting room, it is hours later and she is still standing. Her guests long ago fell into chairs exhausted by her relentless forward drive. And she keeps going. And going.

"That's what's interesting," she says. "I'm growth-oriented. It's exciting to grow."

voices: **Joni Mitchell opens at 8 p.m. on June 30 at the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, and continues to Sept. 17. Admission is free, no tickets are required. For information, call 306-975-8053. Web: www.mendel.saskatoon.sk.ca. E-mail: s@mendel.saskatoon.sk.ca.**