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The glorious obsession of Mitchell’s art

Most of that time is spent re-touching, reconfiguring and rethinking 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 archeology of painting is her way of working with 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 choices when you write them out look like reimagining mathematical equations.’ Overdubbing in the studio adds more layers to the music. The design space is what she calls ‘internal twisting,’ a helix-like structure with its own tornado-like feel. But the overall impression is more subtle. The musical colours, like the hues on her palette, are smoky and muted, the result of mixing many different tones at once.

The music, songwriting and painting are linked in other, intrinsic 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 that time was very poetic, very lyrical, a lot of interlocking forms on a page. One day I got sick of that and

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 me 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 re-imagine her art 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 have long ago fell into chairs exhausted by her relentless forward drive and she keeps going. And going.

‘People are interesting,’ she says. ‘I am growing-oriented. It’s exciting to grow.’

voices: Joni Mitchell opens at 8 p.m. on June 18 with the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, and continues, to Sept. 17. Admission is free, no tickets are required. For information, call 306-975-8853. Web site: www.mendel.saskatoon.sk.ca. E-mail: voices@mandel.saskatoon.sk.ca.

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