

# Portrait of a singer's inner soul

Like her songs, Joni Mitchell's paintings depict the links between life and art

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In her liner notes for *Mingus*, the collaborative album with the great jazz composer, which she released in 1979, Joni Mitchell described her songs as "audio paintings." This commingling of sonic and visual pictures has always been at the centre of Mitchell's sensibility. And it helps to explain the range of the 87 works in various media that make up voices: The work of Joni Mitchell, her 30-year retrospective curated by director Gilles Hébert, which opened Friday at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon.

Mitchell is among a handful of singer-songwriters — the list includes Bob Dylan, Van Morrison and Leonard Cohen — who have irretrievably, and for the better, altered pop music in this century. Her richly textured and layered lyrics are autobiographical fragments of a life lived, if not in the fast lane, at least in an intense one. "I want to get up and jive," she declares in *All I Want* from 1971's *Blue*. "I want to wreck my stockings in some juke-box dive."

The singer's visual art reflects the same relationship between life and art that characterizes her lyrics, although sometimes in a more transparent way. In her musical life, Mitchell has been obliged to pay at

least cursory attention to the requirements of the music industry, but in her painting life she has followed only her own instincts. The result is a body of work that is less homogenous than honorific; Mitchell has painted who and what she likes with no concessions to either art fashion or market pressures.

That said, she wears her tributary heart on her sleeve for critics to peck at. Picasso and Matisse are at the top of the list. Visual echoes of David Hockney and Larry Rivers also register in her work but they seem part of a larger, unsystematic eclecticism that leads her to paint in a wide number of styles. There are structured abstractions, traditional prairie landscapes, expressionist portraits, Pre-Raphaelite evocations, craggy realism and even witty spoofs of Canadian wilderness painting.

Clearly, Mitchell likes to sit on the questioning edge: Her self-portrait as van Gogh, *sans* ear, for example, is a darkly wry comment on her reception in the music business. But in spite of all the visual quotation, Mitchell remains curiously distant from the art world — distant and solitary.

What does emerge with the clarity of a meadowlark's song is the lasting effect the prairies have



The artist in front of her work at the opening of voices: Joni Mitchell.

GLEN BERGER/Canadian Press

played in shaping her art. Mitchell's early landscapes, such as *The Road to Uncle Lyle's, No. 1*, were attempts to frame the vast prairie space by structuring the landscape as a series of interlocking forms — a highway sign, a section of field, a piece of land viewed through a rear-view mirror. She was a kind of tectonic surveyor, or a landscape gambler shuffling the components of prairie space as if they belonged to a deck of cards. To the extent that Mitchell's hand hadn't caught up to her mind, they were better ideas than paintings. Recently, she has depicted the landscape in more conventional ways: In *40 Below 0*, 1995, the wintry sky has a look of impenetrable, almost nuclear cold; *The Road to Waskesui*, 1995, is a deftly realized minimal landscape showing Mitchell at her most subtle.

The images that most effectively embody her sense of comfort with the prairie were actually the product of a happy accident. A series of 20 photographs began as unintended double exposures that were subsequently manipulated into

startling bodyscapes, in which the artist's flatland presence is captured in a kind of eerie transcendence, her eyes peering out along the horizon from a collapsed outbuilding, or her facial features a spooky blur of grassland — *The Blair Witch Project* meets *Little House on the Prairie*.

While Mitchell's most recent work is doggedly figurative and representational, she has made abstract paintings before that remain her most compelling. These often sumptuous works include *The Ice Offering*, 1976; *Round About Midnight*, 1991; and *Black Orpheus, No. 2*, 1985 — all fine paintings, even as they make evident the painters who inspired them. *The Ice Offering* looks like Hans Hofmann, but the middle section, where the pigment vibrates and fattens up, is Mitchell's own. *Round About Midnight* is a dark tribute to Monet. *Black Orpheus* uses every technique available to a contemporary painter — its layered surface is scraped, dripped and otherwise made beautiful through a rich agitation.

*The Stranger*, 1991, is the best painting in the exhibition. It looks to be an abstract variation on a Vuillard interior that opens onto a garden of riotous colour. The abstractions and the self-portraits, in which Mitchell strikes various poses, are the high points of the show — evidence that the hands Mitchell deals best, in fact, regard herself and the process that transforms the abstract contents of her mind into the elegant layers of her painted imagination.

It's impossible not to view this show through the kaleidoscopic prism of Mitchell's music and lyrics, and the Mendel wouldn't be looking at her work were she a painter who came in off the street. But unlike other celebrities who have picked up an art form (Bryan Adams, the photographer, comes immediately to mind), Mitchell has been working at painting for more than four decades; she also studied at the Alberta College of Art.

Still, despite that early training and her persistent avocation, Mitchell emerges as a worldly ver-

sion of a naive artist, indifferent to art trends and the positioning that has so much to do with contemporary art. At the press conference in advance of the opening, she admitted that Le Douanier Rousseau was her favourite painter in her formative years. Like him, she addresses the world she lives in, and the places and figures who share it with her, and then depicts them in a sort of painted romance. She also said that "you have to decide if you want to be a star or if you want to be an artist." In voices, her status as a star will initially attract people to the Mendel. But her genuine aspiration to be an artist is what will keep them there long after the novelty wears off of a pop icon who paints.

Robert Enright is the editor-at-large for *Border Crossings* magazine and a cultural reporter with CBC's 24 Hours in Winnipeg. *Voices: The Work of Joni Mitchell* runs at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon through Sept. 17. Information: (306) 975-8053; voices@mendel.saskatoon.sk.ca