that she “be ranked among the formal and intellectual heavyweights of her generation” (35), Wilke created Advertisements for Living (1966-84), a large photographic diptych showing a shirtless Wilke with her body tattooed with the initials of “brand-name” (86) male artists like Carl Andre, Sol Le Witt, and David Smith. Initials also reference three important lovers—DG (Donald Goddard, whom she eventually married), RH (Richard Hamilton, who defended her work), and, lastly, CO (Claes Oldenburg), who shortly after ending his relationship with Wilke in 1977, married Coosje van Bruggen (85).

Princenthal skillfully shows how anger and hurt fueled Wilke’s artistic response to this rejection, which involved the use of his name, initials, image, and references to his art. Oldenberg, who was honored with a major exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1978, successfully sued her; claiming, as reported in Arts Magazine, “a separate, ‘right of publicity,’ the right to control the commercial use of his name or likeness” (89). This did not deter Wilke, who in 1978, at age 38, performed So Help Me Hannah (Fig. 1) and Snatch Shots with Ray Guns in the nude at PS.1 in Long Island City. “Melancholy, fatigue, and even helplessness alternate with poses that present her, albeit ruefully, as an armed avenger or martial goddess” (90).

Princenthal writes sympathetically of a performance she describes as “a frontal assault on a man who had exploited...and then hurt her” (90). Because Oldenberg’s reaction to this threat or his version of the story is missing (perhaps he declined the opportunity to be interviewed), Princenthal creates the perception that Wilke was waging yet again a vindictive and opportunistic one-sided battle. Another problematic aspect of Princenthal’s argument about agency is the total lack of critical consideration of Wilke’s reliance on several male photographers to document important performances, including Goddard, who photographed Snatch Shots with Ray Guns. Conversely, Sherman acts as both model and photographer and thus has complete authorship of her work. Never using her art to publicly air personal issues, Sherman also possesses a confidence and the strength of self-possession that Wilke clearly lacked.

Hannah Wilke’s squabbles over real and perceived slights faded away following first her mother’s and then her own unsuccessful battle with cancer. Princenthal observes in Chapter 4, that the “gallows humor” (118) of the photographs chronicling her treatment and the Intra-Venus Tapes, (1990-93), a 16-channel video installation produced with her husband, “allowed a great many people who had previously been leery of Wilke to embrace her in sympathy, pity and, inevitably, schadenfreude” (122). Princenthal cautions against reading the artist’s work and life—she passed away at age 52 in 1993—as “a tidy narrative arc that goes from beauty to decay, pride to a fall” (122). Eager to portray Wilke as inquisitive about the world and “its mechanism of power” (144), Princenthal returns to her pre-illness body in Chapter 5, where she focuses on a nude photograph of “Wilke shaping an image of herself shaping her self-portraits” (144) that is related to her painted plaster and chocolate works known collectively as Venus Pareve (1982-4). Princenthal concludes, “Her work in sum is an epic story of felicity and determination, of drive—the kind of ambition that is particularly suspect in women, and in men is more often simply credited as hard work—and acceptance” (144).

Although I admire this book and encourage others to read it, I simply fail to see or appreciate the “spirit of affirmation” (7) in Wilke’s life and works that Princenthal so values. Two particular passages stick in my mind. The first is, “Wilke invited us to enter her life in its every particular—and, equally, to find our own lives reflected there” (13). The second is, “By the standards of candor and self-determination for which Wilke was such an ardent spokesperson, we look weak and self-indulgent, unwilling to stand out and speak up” (13). How can we look at the films or photographic record of Wilke’s performance work today and not think of the millions of people daily shaping their own identities on-line and sharing perhaps too much information about themselves through tweets, sexting, on-line video, and social networking sites? Explicit nude photographs, confessional content, political statements, publicity stunts, and retaliatory freedom of expression, i.e., the public bullying or exploitation of others, exists in near permanent electronic form haunting both the creator and recipient for life. Wilke’s work and even her anger seem tame, even innocent and vulnerable, in comparison. The world is a very different place than in the 1970s and 1980s. An awareness of a significant shift in the reader’s lifestyle, behavior, and values is missing from what is an otherwise remarkable book.

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Joan Mitchell, Lady Painter
by Patricia Albers
Alfred A. Knopf, 2011

Reviewed by Virginia Allison Harbin

In her comprehensive biography of Joan Mitchell (1926–92), Patricia Albers constructs a vivid and tragic account of this painter’s life, loves, and most important, her struggle to be recognized as an Abstract Expressionist of the first rank. The exhaustively researched account of Mitchell’s life depicts her as a complex and troubled person who, while not entirely likeable, is certainly worthy of respect. Mitchell’s life is described in stunning detail, with material pulled from interviews, correspondence, and archives. Albers makes a convincing argument that Mitchell’s external barriers to success were because of her gender, and that her transgressive behavior was often seen as “masculine” and disagreeable. Albers demonstrates that, in a notable parallel with her male colleagues of the New York School, Mitchell’s life was plagued by addiction. The only difference that accounts for their relatively rapid
success compared with her lifelong—and resentful—struggle for recognition is her gender. What becomes most clear from this deeply personal account are the vast difficulties of being respected as a “lady painter” in the New York art scene of the 1950s and 1960s. While Joan Mitchell might not have characterized herself as feminist, Albers’s account of her life is undeniable feminist.

Mitchell’s mother was a wealthy Chicago socialite and poet, and her father appears as a self-made man with a significant chip on his shoulder. The rivalry between father and daughter can, in many ways, be seen as the foundation for Mitchell’s cultivation of a masculine artistic persona. In the first chapter Albers describes how her parents’ behavior affected their children:

The more subtly she [her mother] patronized him [her father], the more he pushed their daughters, setting standards for them and basking in their accomplishments, but also competing with them and undermining their self-confidence when it threatened his own (15).

Albers’s psychoanalytic approach to the biography is closely aligned with Mitchell’s own preoccupation with psychoanalytic therapy and theory. Mitchell was heavily invested in the opinions and guidance of her Freudian psychotherapist, Edrita Fried. Albers notes that, in times of trouble, Mitchell “promptly handed over every major decision to Fried” (160). While such a straightforwardly psychoanalytic interpretation of Mitchell’s life can at times appear somewhat over-determined, it is nonetheless an accurate reflection of Mitchell’s own dependence on psychoanalysis to describe her life as well as her paintings.

Albers annotates Mitchell’s career trajectory with biography, illustrating their inseparability, beginning with childhood accounts of Mitchell’s unique conception of color. As Mitchell’s career progresses in this biography, one begins to grasp a sense of her marvelous use of paint and the way in which the elements of her life are infused into her canvases (Fig. 1). Beginning in art school in Chicago and during her times in New York and then France, Albers demonstrates that the only constants in Mitchell’s life were her exhaustive studio practice and alcoholism. Lovers come and go, and at best, characterize Mitchell’s life for brief periods, but the thing that remains is paint. Albers depicts her as a privileged and highly educated artist, whose family wealth gave her the freedom to make art and behave as one of the boys of Abstract Expressionism. Like Willem de Kooning, but contra others of that group, Mitchell had a “rigorous Beaux-arts training, the kind that should belie the skepticism of a certain public quick to label abstract artists as inept, if not fraudulent” (108). In nearly every respect, Mitchell is presented as a thoroughly first wave Abstract Expressionist, from her tumultuous personal life to her art school training.

Mitchell was not interested in supporting other women artists or the feminist movement. Rather, as revealed in interviews, letters, and archives, Mitchell was more interested in climbing over other women, and men for that matter. She longed to be a solitary woman artist among male artists, and throughout this biography the reader sees the fashioning of Mitchell’s masculine/feminine persona.

Albers writes in juicy detail about Mitchell’s love affairs and the ripples they caused within her circle, such as Elaine de Kooning’s resentment towards her, as well as the consequences of her numerous infidelities on her own relationships. For Albers, these scandalous accounts serve to demonstrate just how hard Mitchell fought to be a part of the group and to become “one of the guys.” Albers even connects her affairs directly to her desire to paint, for example,

With feral joy, Joan had rushed blindly into the affair never pausing to consider its consequences. She took what she needed. Sex, yes. But also the fact that Mike [Goldberg] was a painter. Joan was drunk on painting, drunk on New York, drunk on Mike—all the same thing (153).

While it may be said that Albers constructs a myth of the artist as a solitary and troubled genius, she does so in a way that challenges a gendered conception of artistic genius. Mitchell is characterized as egotistic and fragile. She could paint, love, and drink just as hard as her male colleagues, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and ultimately, she was just as haunted and troubled as they were, if not more so.

A fascinating aspect of the biography is the way Albers exposes just how incestuous and sexist the art world was. In particular, the comments of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg are sure to ruffle feathers and challenge the way in which Abstract Expressionism’s legacy is seen and understood. Using asides and parentheses in a wonderfully Irigarayan sense, she leaves the reader
shocked and wanting more. For example, in describing the difficulties of women securing gallery representation, Albers drops in “(Clem Greenberg had advised Sam Kootz not to take any women because they’d just get pregnant)” (172).

The group dynamic of the New York School and its satellites is manifested in descriptions of the summer-long alcohol binges in the Hamptons with the de Koonings and Rosenbergs. These accounts also capture Mitchell’s embedded position in this hard-drinking, boys’ network in such a way as to question Mitchell’s demeaned status as a “secondary” Abstract Expressionist. Albers also describes the dynamic of alliances and competition between groups, placing Mitchell firmly in the art historical camp of de Kooning and Rosenberg, though carefully noting that this group was just as skeptical of women artists as the “opposing” Pollock-Greenberg camp. The author complicates Rosenberg’s heroic pronouncements for the artist with notions of gender and false-grandeur, and descriptions of ravaging addictions that affected many of the heroic and masculine Abstract Expressionist artists as well as Mitchell herself. Although Albers paints Greenberg as sexist and an impediment to Mitchell’s success, she sees Rosenberg, too, as placing Mitchell out of serious consideration as a legitimate Abstract Expressionist. Rosenberg, she writes, “imposed a gendered conceptual framework upon a painting attitude supposedly based in absolute freedom: the Abstract Expressionist as a hairy-chested, heroically individual he-man doing battle with his canvas” (197). Needless to say, such direct and unhesitating male chauvinism had devastating effects on Mitchell as well as on other female contemporaries who “did not fit the mold of the modern man’s confrontation with absolute freedom and existential angst and thus [were], in effect, sidelined by Rosenberg’s rhetoric” (198). In her exhaustive detailing of each phase of Mitchell’s career, Albers notes the artist’s influences, experiences, and states of mind. In a particularly poignant passage, she depicts an older Mitchell, living in France, who refused to let anyone into her studio, not even a repairman, for fear her blurry abstractions would be judged negatively. Albers unflinchingly addresses Mitchell’s alcoholism and how it fueled her paintings; for better or for worse the two were inseparable.

Not an art book but a substantial (over 500 pages) biographical study, it includes dozens of photographs of the artist and her milieu as well as some images of Mitchell’s paintings, extensive notes, and a comprehensive index. In sum, Albers paints a picture of a woman haunted by insecurities and feelings of inferiority, beginning with her father and exacerbated by a systematic devaluation of her work because of her gender. While these did not stop her from painting amazing works, they did deny her full entry into the art world until after Abstract Expressionism’s crucial moment had passed. Albers presents Mitchell as an indisputable force within Abstract Expressionism, and while it may be too late to soften the bitterness felt by Joan Mitchell the person, it is always the right time to celebrate Joan Mitchell the artist.

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Double Solitaire:
The Surreal Worlds of
Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy

Rich illustrations of works by the Surrealist couple Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy, often placed side by side for comparison, offer a unique opportunity to examine intersections of their lives and art and to explore the ways in which each was inspired by the other. This is the focus of both authors in their respective essays: Stephen Robeson Miller’s “The Intersection of Art and Fate,” and Jonathan Stuhlman’s “Double Solitaire.” Elaborating on biographical and formal connections of their artistic exchange, the authors make a convincing case for the influence of the lesser-known Sage on the work of her far more famous husband, which seems to be a primary purpose of this project.