

Joni Mitchell as a kind of kitchen god for gay men has been going on since the 70s. She still represents for the radical faeries and the organic beardies, and she's making inroads into the design bear world now, too. I don't know how much they listen to the later stuff, the experimental jazz and the scolding ecological lectures.

I support the cynical old schoolmarm Joni. I love when they asked her opinion of Gaga. "The mission of every sociopath is exposure." But I also dig Laurel Canyon Joni, doing coke at Mama Cass's.

I would go all the way back. Back to the bootlegs of her playing folk clubs in Winnipeg and Philadelphia and Florida, where David Crosby first saw her. "Eastern Rain" and "Carnival in Kennorra" and goofy patter in between. She was singing in her stately art song voice, but it was these playful portrait sketches and teenage memories of Saskatchewan. It's very reminiscent of Bowie doing things like "Gospel According to Tony Day" and "God Knows I'm Good." They both could have gone off in any one of a hundred directions at that point.

6 and 7. Erik Hanson. There are two oil paintings here. Erik is the artist that I'm most familiar with in this show.

You turned me on to his work and I am an unabashed fan. He's the best at delineating my own relationship to pop stars and the music. I'm glad he's doing Joni Mitchell.

These paintings are not like any he's done before, yet they still encourage you to discover context. First off, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" makes me think of Frank Perry's *The Swimmer*, with Burt Lancaster attempting to swim across his suburban town, one backyard pool after another. Then also the lyric from the song: "He put her in a ranch house on a hill. She could see the Valley barbecues from her window sill."

Oddly enough, she mentions a "diamond dog, carrying a cup and a cane" in that song. Well, I can understand your connecting all of this to Frank Perry, the most dystopian American director of the era. I always think of *Hissing* as Joni's response to Joan Didion, and it was Perry who directed the film version of her book *Play It As It Lays*.

I don't know if you remember this, but when she toured to promote *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* she wore a tacky stretch-knit pants suit onstage and had her hair done up kind of strangely. Lily Tomlin was doing a housewife character around that time, and there was a feeling of masks and impersonation going on. Again, Bowie's influence was being felt.

This second painting by Erik Hanson has all the feel of that in it. The high cheekbones and the one eye different than the other. It seems to fix like a flashbulb a permanent impression of someone in that particular time and place in Southern California. The washed-out portrait songs like "Edith and the Kingpin" and "Shades of Scarlett Conquering"; the zonking of all these otherwise impressive people by drugs and feathered hair. (*laughs*)

—Steve Lafreniere [excerpted from an essay in progress]

Joni

"I was at a Hopi snake dance a couple of weeks ago and there were tourists who acted like Indians and Indians who acted like tourists. You're just a bunch of tourists."

—Joni Mitchell, *Isle of Wight Festival, 1970*

On a snowy winter night in 1974 I'm doubled over the beveled lip of the stage at the University of Colorado Fieldhouse. Patchouli, ditch weed and b.o. have replaced the oxygen, and I'm thinking of passing out when the house lights suddenly flicker off, and the slow clapping of three thousand hippies and teenage girls behind me switches to a roar. A tight round spotlight opens on the stage. There's a flash of silhouette to the left and Joni Mitchell, in marcelled waves and a slinky ankle-length 40s evening dress, moves quickly from the wings, furiously strumming a jet-black Martin guitar. Even before she gets to the microphone she's singing, bellowing almost. "Look out the left the captain said! The lights down there that's where we'll land! I saw a falling star burn up above the Las Vegas sands!" Her face, its mythic bone structure flattened under the spotlight, looks radiant, the eyes paranoid, the grin an overbit rictus. I'm tripping lightly, but there's an unmistakable foreboding in her voice. She's not come here tonight with news of Morgantown.

I've been thinking about Joni and Bowie recently, in that period of *Court and Spark* and *Hissing of Summer Lawns* and also *Diamond Dogs* and *Station To Station*.

There was actually a point in the 70s that I would get them mixed up, get their lyrics confused. There was such a lot of paranoia that they were observing. Personal and global.

I saw them both perform in 1974.

That would be *Court and Spark* for Joni?

Right, and *Diamond Dogs*. I want to go deeper on that subject, but first let's talk about the work in this show. Have you had a chance to look at the jpegs I sent?

Quickly. I was intrigued with almost everything, which is unusual.

Oh, good. Well, in this exhibition most of the work references the period between *Blue* and *Hejira*. It's all over the map intent-wise. The organizing question, I suppose, is why have all these artists made art about Joni Mitchell in the last few years? From straight-ahead portraiture of Joni, to self-portraiture as Joni, to photographs of John Kelly who performs live sort of *inside* Joni. *Becoming her*.

I saw him do that some years back. What I thought was interesting was that he divided the show into conceptual Joni eras, pre- and post-LA. Which seemed smart, but also maybe a bit VH-1. But what he did with that was brilliant. John Kelly was probably a young gay boy listening to Joni Mitchell. I don't think he grew up with the albums coming out once a year like teenage updates the way we did. The show felt authentic, but kind of received at the same time.

Right, most of the artists in this show are working with ideas of Joni Mitchell at least one generation removed. Of course it's important to remember that because of the miracle of recorded sound, they all have direct access to her work.

I have the images in front of me

OK, let's look at each one, and expand on some ideas as we go along.

In numerical order?

Yes. 1. This is Mark Chamberlain, it's a 10-by-9 watercolor.

I'm sorry, it's ravishing. Is that the artist's face?

I'm told that it is.

On the cover of *Hejira*, Joni has plucked eyebrows and mascara, which make her face imperious and blank. She looks like a model having an argument with the photographer. Mark Chamberlain has deep-set eyes that turn the same expression into something quite different, equally unreadable. There does seem to be more sorrow. I love this.

My eye goes to the fingers and the cigarette. Until I saw this I'd never noticed how they echo the photo of Duchamp in drag as Rose Selavy.

Yep, no doubt it took time to get her digits just so. Chamberlain is also maybe aware that on Joni's next album she posed in drag and blackface.

2. Jason Villegas, and this is fabric on canvas, 6-by-6.

Inches? It seems so much larger. I know his work, and especially like the portraits. Here he's working from Jack Robinson's iconic photo, I think 1968, in which she's wearing a kind of Mexican peasant djalaba (*laughs*) and is sitting uncomfortably on the floor.

Villegas did a great drawing of Costello Tagliapietra. This is more like his Michael Jackson, though. He's cross-wired Robinson's iconic *Life* magazine folksinger image with something more paranoid.

It's almost like a Pettibon. It could be the cover of *Tripping Corpse*! I'm used to gay men thinking of her as sister-goddess, which is just lazy journalism. Bravo, Jason Villegas, for letting the cocaine in.

3. Melanie Schiff. It's a C print, 50 by 60. Do you know her photos?

Yes, she's from here [Chicago]. First off, what I love is that it acknowledges that the *Blue* cover is one of the hardest artifacts of the 70s. You find them at thrift stores in every imaginable state—warped, ripped, boiled, braised, scribbled on, covered with roach burns. I like that here it's just dead, blotto.

***Blue* is the Joni Mitchell record that most people are familiar with. Which is kind of strange, because it's also when her songs became considerably darker. The bemused rural sarcasm starts to shade into L.A. cynicism on this album. Hence this is the period that rivets me.**

Melanie Schiff has built a reputation for the way she manipulates light in her photos. I can see why, looking at this one. Also, Joni Mitchell plus swimming pool generally equals Los Angeles, but what's great about this image of abandonment

and rot is that it could easily be Wichita. Which, of course, is one of the key points of *Blue*.

It's around the time Joni's friends and people in the music industry were starting to use junk, and she was running as fast as she could from Graham Nash, etcetera. Where did she finally land to write *Blue*?

Ibiza, I think. Formentera and Malibu.

Here are some words from *Blue* that you could say were like billboards along my teenage highway: "Stay with him if you can. But be prepared to bleed"; "The jealousy, the greed is the unraveling. And it undoes all the joy that could be"; "All romantics meet the same fate someday. Cynical and drunk and boring someone in some dark cafe."

You forgot "Acid, booze, and ass. Needles, guns, and grass. Lotsa laughs." [*laughs*]

She famously did not consider herself a feminist. But these songs about love are more accurately songs about men. The complex arrangements and open tunings and -vocal prowess are all in the service of a penetrating, harrowing take on men.

Well, for balance I'd have to say that alienation of other stripes are in there too. I still wince at the lines we just quoted, but also the bored way she sings "They won't give peace a chance. That was just a dream some of us had."

4. Abbey Williams. This is the video.

Oh, nice segue. She's singing that very line in the piece, while all these people shop around her for, what, furniture?

Yeah, it was shot in Ikea. Apparently it took some time, as she kept getting chased out by security.

It would appear that security are the only ones who gave a shit. What's striking is that in every shot she's so thoroughly hunkered down, too. She doesn't appear to be trying out the goods, or even waiting for someone. There she is singing "California," this wail of alienation and malaise, and how perfect that everyone is ignoring her. It's the brass tacks of it.

I haven't been able to get it out of my head.

I'd like to see more of her work. That's just killer. Is there any other *Blue*-oriented work?

Yes. 5. Chris Bogia.

Now, by the materials list, I'm given to believe that the album cover is yarn on wood.

The eyes are walnut, and the tears are blown glass. Chris is interested in expanding the decorative in unprecedented ways.

When you say that, I think of Jim Isermann. This seems more devotional, though.

It's from a series of album covers by female musicians. There's also a performative version, where he and other men assume these hard-to-read naked poses as part of the installation.

The tears and the 60s hippie eyes are a nice touch. I assume this is about Joni's goddess aspect?

No, I don't think so. It's more about examining gay domestic spaces.