

# Both Sides Now

A home-town exhibition showcases songwriter Joni Mitchell's talent as a visual artist

By **Brian Bergman** in Saskatoon

*Oh I am a lonely painter  
I live in a box of paints  
I'm frightened by the devil  
And I'm drawn to those ones that  
ain't afraid*

—Joni Mitchell, *A Case of You*

When **Gilles Hébert** accepted a job as director of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon two years ago, he knew very little about his adopted city. “I knew that it had a very good art gallery, that it was on the Prairies—and that it was the place where Joni Mitchell came from,” says the Winnipeg-born, Vancouver-bred Hébert. He was also aware that, in addition to being one of the most influential and celebrated songwriters of her generation, Mitchell, 56, was an avid painter. From that sprang an audacious thought: why not mount a retrospective of Mitchell's visual art and invite the Los Angeles-based pop icon to return to her Prairie home for the opening? After much persistence, Hébert got his wish, and on June 30 the normally sedate Mendel gallery will unveil an 81-piece exhibition, *Voices*, which is expected to draw Mitchell fans and media attention from around the globe.

After several false starts, Hébert first met up with Mitchell a year ago when she was making one of her periodic visits to Saskatoon, where her parents still reside. He had con-



tacted an old friend of the singer who, in turn, arranged a supper meeting between the two. Mitchell was immediately receptive to the idea of an exhibition. Over the next nine months, Hébert made three trips to Los Angeles to visit with Mitchell and view her paintings, many of them on display at her palatial Bel Air home. He was impressed by both



Get out of the Kitchen #2 (1983);  
Turbulent Indigo *self-portrait*  
(far left); 40 Below 0 (bottom):  
the singer displays an eclectic,  
restless streak in her painting



Photography by Sheila Spence

One of the works in the forthcoming exhibition that best illustrates Mitchell's Saskatchewan roots is *40 Below 0*, a haunting view of a snow-covered Prairie road at dusk. The 1995 oil painting captures a scene that Mitchell and a companion took in while driving through the barren countryside near Prince Albert. "She's been known to come here in the dead of winter, rent a 4x4 and head to the country to take photographs," says Hébert. "She then takes those photos to Bel Air and paints Canadian Prairie landscapes."

Mitchell's landscapes are just one part of her oeuvre. As in her music—which has run the gamut from folk to jazz to torch songs—Mitchell displays an eclectic, restless streak in her visual art. The Saskatoon exhibition gives viewers the full kaleidoscope. There are the studied self-portraits that have graced several of her album and CD covers. There are abstract paintings from the late 1970s and 1980s showing her in full experimental bloom. And there are reproductions taken from early sketch-pad drawings—including one of a youthful Neil Young—that Mitchell did backstage in the 1960s as she waited to perform.

For Mitchell, visual art is no trifling hobby. Before she ever strummed a guitar, she had picked up a paint brush. "Painting was her first love," recalls her father, Bill Anderson, a retired executive with a grocery-store chain. "And I think it will be her last love when the music industry gets too much for her." Mitchell has said as much herself. Asked about the prospect of being dropped by her record label, she once said: "Although I do feel some responsibility to my gift, my ace in the hole is that I don't care if they drop me. I'll just cash in my marbles and go paint."

Born in Fort Macleod, Alta., the only child of Bill and Myrtle Anderson, Joni lived briefly in the Saskatchewan communities of Maidstone and North Battleford before her family moved to Saskatoon when she was 11. A year earlier, she had contracted polio and she credits her long convalescence with helping to instil an artistic sensibility. "She didn't really have a normal childhood," Bill Anderson told

the quality and quantity of her work: together, they sifted through about 500 paintings, drawings and photo montages created over nearly four decades. But Hébert was also struck by what a strong artistic and personal attachment Mitchell has to the Canadian Prairies. "Her connection with this place," he says, "is really quite incredible."

## Before Mitchell ever strummed a guitar, she had picked up a paint brush

*Maclean's*. “She was with adults most of the time.” A turning point came when a Grade 7 English teacher saw the young girl’s paintings and told her: “If you can paint with a brush, you can paint with words.”

Joni’s interests gradually turned to music and in 1964 she left for Toronto, where she met and briefly married fellow folksinger Chuck Mitchell. But even as her career took off with hits like *Both Sides Now*, *The Circle Game* and *Big Yellow Taxi*, Mitchell continued to paint. And when the commercial success of her music waned during the 1980s and early 1990s, her visual art provided solace. “For her, it’s a very personal activity,” says Hébert. “Unlike her music, she’s not painting for other people, but for herself.”

**Mitchell’s only formal** training was a short stint at the Alberta College of Art & Design in Calgary, where she dropped out after one year. She remains skeptical of the value of art schools and sensitive that her painting may not be taken seriously by some because of her musical celebrity. In 1991, Mitchell was invited back to Saskatoon to address a Canadian Conference of the Arts symposium on art education, titled “We’re Gonna Make Van Goghs.” Mitchell, who was feeling underappreciated by the music industry at the time, spoke in her usual stream-of-consciousness manner about how art school had failed to fulfil her needs. She later recalled how, in the next day’s Saskatoon *StarPhoenix*, a local painter declared “he didn’t need some rich rock star standing up there telling him she was a serious artist.” Added Mitchell: “I went back to Los Angeles and got serious.”

Springing directly from that experience was the title song for Mitchell’s 1994 CD, *Turbulent Indigo*. “You wanna make Van Goghs,” she sings on the title track, “raise ’em up like sheep/make ’em out of Eskimos/and women if you please.” For the cover art—also part of the coming exhibition—Mitchell painted her own face, with a bandaged ear, in a recreation of a famous 1889 Van Gogh self-portrait. Mitchell won Grammy Awards that year for both the CD and the cover art. In fact, *Turbulent Indigo* marked the

beginning of a kind of Mitchell renaissance. She has since been inducted (belatedly, in her view) into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and received a Governor General’s Award. She was recently the subject of an all-star televised tribute featuring artists such as Elton John, James Taylor and k.d. lang. In April, Mitchell released her latest CD, *Both Sides Now*, to rave reviews. Backed by a 71-piece orchestra, she



*Black Orpheus #2 (1985); sketch of Neil Young (right): studied self-portraits from album and CD covers mix with abstract paintings from the late 1970s and 1980s that show the artist in full experimental bloom*



covers several torch standards and provides a lush reinterpretation of two of her own songs, including the title tune.

Now, the Saskatoon exhibition promises to give new exposure to another side of Mitchell’s talent. And her scheduled homecoming is already causing a stir. Hébert is bracing for an opening-night crowd of up to 8,000, about 10 times the normal turnout. Even before formally publicizing the event, he had received e-mails and letters from Mitchell fans as far away as Britain and Australia. Among them was a man from New Orleans who wrote that “he didn’t know where or what Saskatoon was, but he was coming.”

All the same, Hébert says he is keen not to turn the event into “some Hollywood blockbuster.” Mitchell, who has only sporadically exhibited her paintings, agreed to the forthcoming show in large part because it was in Saskatoon, a city she continues to view fondly. “She’ll talk about her favourite pool halls and which ones had the best jukeboxes so that she could dance,” marvels Hébert. “She’s been away for 36 years but she remembers everything.” For the solitary painter from Bel Air, the brush strokes all lead back home. **m**

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