

## ART; Three Who Were Warmed By the City of Light

By MICHAEL BRENSON

WE ALL KNOW ABOUT THE glory days of Parisian art between the wars and immediately after World War II when all roads seemed to lead to the City of Light and artists from throughout the world huddled together in cafes, pounded the streets and made art with a radiance that no other city could equal.

And we know, too - or at least we have been told - that in the mid- to late 1950's Paris ended. Celebrated American painters who lived there after the war, like Ellsworth Kelly, Sam Francis and Jack Youngerman, came home. Although more and more Americans poured into Paris, the flow of gifted American artists dried up. New York replaced Paris as the art center, and New York artists and critics dismissed Paris - as Parisian artists and critics had once dismissed New York - as artistically provincial.

"When I was visiting the States," said Biala, an American painter with close ties to the Abstract Expressionists, who has lived in Paris for 50 years, "I would sometimes say, very ironically of course, that I live in that well-known backwater, Paris, because that was the feeling."

But now, at a time when most influential American artists reject nationalism with the same ferocity with which their Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist ancestors insisted upon it, the American postwar stigma against France has faded. Many mainstream American artists, including Red Grooms, George Condo, April Gornik, Eric Fischl and Jennifer Bartlett, have spent large chunks of time there. Many others take great pleasure in visiting.

"The American hostility didn't seem so strong to me this time," said Shirley Jaffe, an American painter who has lived in Paris since the early 1950's, after a recent trip to New York for a show at Manhattan's Artists Space. "It was in the 60's that there was that American nationalism." Why They Came, Why They Stayed And clearly not every American artist came home. Some, like Biala, Jaffe and Joan Mitchell, who have known one another for many years, are there still. All three lived in Manhattan and felt the fire of the emerging New York School in the late 1940's. All three warmed by the glow of the School of Paris in the early 50's.

All three settled in France largely because of men with whom they were involved. Why they remain suggests the fundamental differences they have experienced between Paris and New York.

"To me, New York is very male," Mitchell says, perhaps offering a clue as to why these three women stayed while almost all male American artists of comparable ambition left. "Paris is female. The bridges in Paris are like dachshunds. The bridges in New York are like Great Danes."

"In France," she added, "they've always said my work is violent gestural painting. In New York, they've said it's decoration. On both sides, they say it's female."

All three women have something to say about the Parisian magic that seems somehow to have survived convulsive and even brutal change. Whatever spell their work casts was captured in Paris. "Paris," Mitchell declares, "no one can take that away from me." Through their words it is possible to sense the fabric of their lives in another country - a fabric woven by the intimate and volatile relationship between personality, painting and place.

All three have had to deal with outsidership. All three are dependent upon color, which in their paintings concentrates different emotions and experiences rather than drawing lines between them. Their color is European. "There are no colorists in New York," Mitchell says.

Although all three are now glad to have settled far from New York ("If you're living alone, it's a lot easier to live here than it is in a locked-up studio in a loft," Jaffe says), all three are aware how much Paris has changed. "When I came," said Biala, who lives in the sleepy 7th Arrondissement, on the Left Bank, "Paris was a collection of small villages. They have eliminated that to a large extent. Even in this quarter, which I don't specially like, because here is this haute bourgeoisie all around us,

there was a time when on the rue de Sevres there was a marchand de poisson, there was a marchand des quatre-saisons, and everywhere I went, they would say, 'Bonjour, madame, comment va la peinture aujourd'hui?' " Joan Mitchell: *Enfant Terrible*

As painters and as people, the three artists are extremely different. Mitchell was born in Chicago in 1926 and educated at the Art Institute, with its outstanding collection of French painting. "Painting for me was certainly French," she says. She recently had a traveling museum retrospective in the United States. She will have a show at New York's Robert Miller Gallery this fall.

She is known as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist. She has said that "painting is what allows me to survive." Her brushes are packed with paint. Her emphatic, often suspended strokes storm and burst off her large canvases in ways that suggest her lifelong affection for van Gogh.

Mitchell first visited Paris in 1948, then returned in 1955 and became involved with Jean-Paul Riopelle, a Canadian abstract painter who was one of the most influential figures in Paris's expatriate artists' community. "Around 1959 I started to live here more than New York, because of Riopelle," Mitchell says.

She now lives with two assistants and two German shepherds, both with severe hip problems similar to hers, in a big house she acquired 20 years ago in the village of Vetheuil, 45 minutes northwest of Paris. The setting is gorgeous - overlooking the Seine, on the edge of a forest, with overflowing gardens and a large studio with splendid light. Her property adjoins the house in which Monet lived about a century ago.

Mitchell's appearance is insistently matter-of-fact, plain. She is famous for her blunt, colorful language. "I'm known in France as being sauvage, mal elevee," she says with pride.

Whether gentle or sharp, her words have an emotional finality. Even more than Biala and Jaffe, she speaks of her life in a way that brings to mind the Abstract Expressionist belief that a painting should just happen; it should not seem consciously made.

She is the most ambivalent of the three - about the French, about living in France, about being an outsider. She describes herself as being "on the outside and looking in, like the little match girl." She talks about her life in France as if it were an accident. "I hate to be called an exile or an expatriate," she says. "I never made a

choice." Because of her great ambition, she is vulnerable to the vexing question of whether she sailed off down the Seine with the best of postwar Paris and postwar New York or missed the boat in both places.

One moment, when asked if she considers herself a French or an American painter, she is almost defiant. "I'm an American," she says. "I'm New York School. I've never left New York; I still want to go back." (Until 1982 she had a place in New York.) The next moment she is overcome by where she is. "I feel the river," she says. "I like the water. There is a nice light in the Ile de France. Even on a gray day it doesn't close out. You see the red and the green. I feel at home here, as much as I do anywhere." Shirley Jaffe: Pragmatist

Shirley Jaffe, who is 66, was born in Elizabeth, N.J. She first came to Paris in 1949 with her husband, Irving, a historian, who was on the G.I. Bill. She returned in 1952 because of his enthusiasm for the city and remained after their divorce in 1962. When she arrived, the Paris scene was "quite lively," she says. "There were a lot of artists, a lot was going on, there were shows, I was part of it."

Since 1966, she has shown with the Galerie Fournier, which also represents Mitchell. She began as a loose, gestural Abstract Expressionist and then turned to almost diagrammatic, yet still improvisational hard-edged abstractions in which shapes distilled from crowds and streets encourage and assault each other in a white space. For 18 years she has lived in a small, clean, well-lighted place in the Latin Quarter. She has never had a New York gallery.

Jaffe is short, with eager, mobile eyes and teeth held in still determination as she speaks. Although like Mitchell she feels that she has made her life in Paris largely by chance, her life has been even more provisional. "I never really made up my mind to stay here," she says. "I always made a choice to continue to stay based on whether I could continue to paint, whether I had just sold a painting or not, and that gave me some more money for a longer time. It's only now, I think, that over the passage of time I know that I'm here. It's happened pragmatically, to tell you the truth."

Although Jaffe speaks of wanting to paint in New York, she is wary of the New York art world. "In America," Jaffe says, "or at least in New York, I had the distinct impression that there is so much going on that you feel you have to be part of everything. The pressures I have had here I can do without; I don't think I could have withstood them so easily in New York." Biala: Stuff of Novels

Biala is 85 years old. She showed regularly in New York with the now-defunct

Stable and Gruenebaum galleries. Her painting is a blend of realism and fancy. In her interiors, cityscapes, landscapes and portraits, some colors and shapes hover and run; others assert themselves suddenly and then stay put, fixing space in a way that is reminiscent of Bonnard and Hofmann. For almost 30 years she has lived with her husband, the French painter Daniel Brustlein, in a spare, modest house they now share with a black cat.

Biala's life is the stuff of novels. She was born in the eastern Polish village of Biala - which she eventually took as her name. In 1913 she emigrated to New York with her mother and her brother, Jacob Tworkovsky, who became the Abstract Expressionist painter Jack Tworkov. In 1930 she visited Paris for the first time and met Ford Madox Ford, with whom she lived until his death in 1939. She returned to the States that year, then in 1947 went back to Paris with her husband, who, under the name Alain, worked for years as a New Yorker cartoonist.

Biala has the physical and emotional self-confidence of someone 30 years younger. She knows why she stayed. "I fell in love with France. In some ways, it reminded me of the place I was born in. And when I came to France I felt as if I had come home. I smelled the same smells of bread baking and dogs going around in a very busy way, you know, as if they knew what they were about. It really was extraordinarily human. I hadn't known when I was in New York that the skyscrapers were weighing on me, and I felt as if they had suddenly fallen off."

Art is her passport. "I've always had the feeling that I belong where my easel is," she says. "I never have the feeling of nationality or roots. In the first place, I'm an uprooted person. I'm Jewish. I was born in a country where it was better not to be Jewish. Wherever you go, you're in a sense a foreigner. I always felt that wherever my easel was, that was my nationality." A Certain Sweetness

For all three of these artists, the celebrated *douceur* in France still exists, and it is enormously important. "There's a certain sweetness in life here which I think is very much lacking in a city like New York," Biala says.

When asked if the New York art world is still hostile to Paris, she remembered a meeting with Mark Rothko in 1970:

"We saw Rothko just a few weeks before his death - and I think he had always been very anti-French - but that evening he sat beside me and began to ask me about France in a way he had never done before because he wasn't interested, and I had a feeling of somebody who was looking for human warmth. He wanted to find some

point, something, somewhere, where he could feel some kind of humanity. I had a feeling that man was dying on his feet for a lack of humanity, I don't know how to explain it to you."

Biala, Jaffe and Mitchell all feel uneasy with the speed with which so much art in New York is bought and sold, accepted and rejected, delivered and consumed. When asked what changes she noticed in New York, Mitchell first said, "The star system." Then she added, "People painting shows in two months."

In Paris, Jaffe was able to keep showing even though her work did not sell. "Fournier has been willing to continue to give me shows, to carry me for so long," she says. "That would never happen in New York."

"There are people who buy paintings today," she added. "Just as there are younger French artists - and when I say younger I mean the 40-year-old group - there are collectors, people who really want paintings and who are prepared to buy."

#### Reading the Coded Silences

France has profoundly affected their art. Mitchell's paintings are saturated with the light and water around her. In finding gestures for her personal life and her landscape, she uses the outgoing style and attack of Abstract Expressionist friends like de Kooning and Kline in the service of the psychological intimacy of a French painter like Vuillard. "I work very clearly from what is outside me and my feelings about it," she says. "I don't invent it. I have never been an innovator. What interests me is to get the feeling out - what Cezanne was interested in."

For Jaffe, living in Paris has shaped not only the urban-inspired forms she uses but also the spaces between them. "It seems to me," she says, "that the French have a kind of coded language, coded silences, things that are said and unsaid, not directly. I think that the Americans do too, but I don't know how to read it, because I haven't been there, not long enough. And I'm conscious that the French language has given me a sense of play that I might not otherwise have had."

And Biala says of the city: "It's extremely beautiful and paintable. I look for things to paint. For a figurative painter, subject matter is extremely important. That starts you off." Paris is in her color and light, and in the warmth with which she paints kitchens and courtyards and facades. It is also in an absolute faith in painting that artists like Mitchell, Jaffe and Biala share and many younger artists in the United States and France have challenged.

All three artists wonder what their lives would have been like if they had

remained on the other side of the ocean. Yet even Mitchell, with all her doubt, would probably agree with Biala when she says, "If I had to do it all over again, I'd do exactly the same thing."

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A version of this review appears in print on June 25, 1989, on Page 2002031 of the National edition with the headline: ART; Three Who Were Warmed By the City of Light.

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