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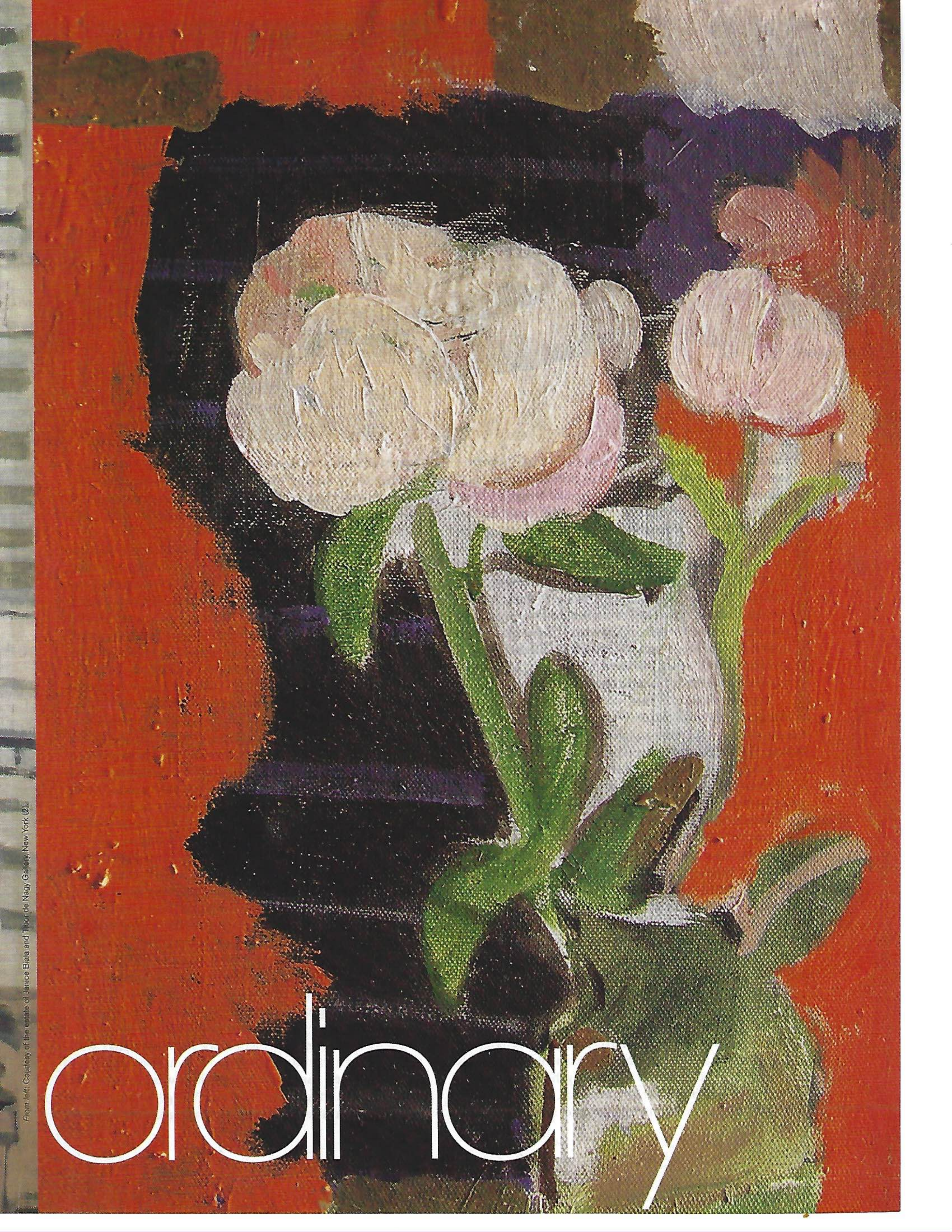
ROOM WITH A VIEW
The Flower Pots, 1985. The critic John Russell called Biala's depiction of Parisian housefronts "small encyclopedias of European life." OPPOSITE PAGE: A late painting, *Two Peonies Against Black and Orange*, 1997.

Both inspiration and muse, the painter Biala lived a life buffeted by wars and migration, yet rich in talent and passion. Jean Nathan unearths the story of a rediscovered twentieth-century heroine.

a life less



From left: Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York (2).

I first saw a Biala painting many years ago at the New York apartment of a woman whose friends and intimates included such blue-chip names as de Kooning and Noguchi. Their work was well represented there, but what really dazzled me was a large winter landscape hanging on the wall behind the dinner table. It was a partial view of an evergreen tree, a snowdrift obscuring its roots and, beside it, a bird feeder inhabited despite the season. Something about the painting gave me the uncanny sensation that I was looking at a self-portrait. I knew I risked appearing ignorant—its prominent placement was surely no accident—but I had no idea whose work it could be, and I became increasingly curious. "Biala," said my hostess. "I'll tell you about her someday." Although I would return often to that apartment, that day never came.

That was, until last winter, when Biala's name seemed to surface everywhere I turned. First she showed up in my mailbox in the form of an announcement from New York's Tibor de Nagy Gallery that they were representing her estate—a show of the late painter's work is to be exhibited there from January 5 to February 4. Around the same time, her name jumped out at me from a biography of the writer Jean Rhys—actually Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams until the writer Ford Madox Ford, best known for *The Good Soldier,* convinced the young Ella that she was a writer, to change her name, and to become his mistress. When their affair ended in 1927, Rhys replaced him quickly, but, I read, "Ford had to wait until 1930 for his last love." It was Biala. And there she was again in the Pulitzer Prize–winning de Kooning biography by Annalyn Swan and Mark Stevens. She was married to her second husband and stepped in to give the then-penniless artist an impromptu wedding lunch when he married Elaine in 1943.

Who was she? I was determined to find out, and my inquiries conjured a stormy, abrasive, and extraordinarily poetic woman, tough and intensely feminine, practical and fanciful, whether painting with a towel thrown around her neck like a prizefighter or dining out with a white fur flung over her shoulders. A tailor's daughter from Poland, she had lived among the greatest writers and artists of the twentieth century, first as a Greenwich Village Bohemian, then as an accomplished painter and a captivating hostess in Paris after the war, with two profoundly happy partnerships along the way. "She was quite an amazing character," said her niece Hermine Ford. "And no one was more amazed by her life than she herself." But the story of Biala (1903–2000) had somehow slipped between the cracks.

Talking to those who knew her well, including my long-ago hostess, Priscilla Morgan, and the daughters of Biala's brother, Jack Tworkov (a New York artist who had been an original member of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism), reading about her in the many Ford biographies, and looking at her art, I discovered a painter whose work had been widely exhibited and praised by everyone from John Russell to John Ashbery but whose reputation had been all but washed away on the tides of movement back and forth between Europe and America. This life in constant motion was partially the consequence of the very worst events of the last century, from pogroms to Nazism and war. But it was a result, too, of her restless and uncompromising nature and her insistence upon finding a place that felt like home, even if she had to paint it into existence. "I belong where my easel is," she once said in answer to a journalist's question about her incessant uprootings.

The story begins in 1903 in Biala, the Polish village near the Russian border where Janice Tworkovsky was born a Jew "in a place," she later said sardonically, "where it was better not to be one." Poland was left behind, though, when Janice and her family fled to America in 1913. By the time they arrived here, as her older brother, Yakov—later Jacob, then Jack—would write, their early life had "fallen off . . . like a dead branch, especially that part which is merely data." Settled into a tenement apartment on New York's Lower East Side and without documentation of even so much as a birth date, the children were refused admission to public school until their father, struggling to navigate red tape in a culture he didn't understand, simply made up the missing facts.

Even before completing high school, Jacob and Janice were searching for a way out of the mean life that, despite every effort, was all their parents could provide. It was Jack who first discovered the art scene in Greenwich Village but Janice who felt the first stirrings of a sense of belonging and the desire to

My inquiries conjured a stormy, abrasive, and extraordinarily poetic woman, tough and intensely feminine, practical and fanciful

RIPENESS IS ALL

THIS PAGE: *Tranche de Melon sur Plat Bleu,* 1986. OPPOSITE PAGE: *From left,* Biala on the beach, 1941. In *Bird Feeder,* 1996, birds inhabit a snowy landscape, perhaps a metaphor for the artist's own life.

From left: Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York; Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala, in the collection of Priscilla Morgan, New York; Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

become an artist. To pay for classes at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League she took jobs at the Western Union telegraph office and as a shopgirl. And as if to signal a new start while keeping a beloved place and her past with her always, Janice decided to take "Biala," which means "white" in Polish, for her name. She kept with her, too, an enormous hostility toward the Poles, who had forced her from her homeland and taught her of "the ferocity of men to men," which, she wrote, "staggers my mind and fills me with such horror and disgust." But these feelings also galvanized a young immigrant to make an extraordinary life, surrounded by what she called "the redeemers, all those people who by their thoughts, their works, their actions, or their lives have redressed the balance a little of ferocity, injustice, and cruelty." She would later say that her life didn't really begin until she met Ford. "In living for him—I became myself," she wrote. "He found a little handful of dust and turned it into a human being. . . ." But she sold herself short. By the time they aligned, when she was 26, she had already done the hardest work.

In the spring of 1930, Biala headed for France, a place she had longed to visit ever since she first read *The Three Musketeers* as a girl in Poland. According to her niece Helen Tworkov, she was also anxious to find a way out of an impulsive early marriage to Lee Gatch, a fellow artist. Just days after her arrival, she met Ford when a friend invited her to one of his Thursday "at-homes." Biala had never heard of him and agreed to go only when she learned that Ezra Pound, whom she revered, was a regular.

At 56, Ford was a literary titan, having by then published 68 books and countless articles and edited two of the most important literary journals of the time. "Practically every writer of serious substance in Britain or America moved through his life and gained from his mind and presence," wrote Eudora Welty. As did a long chain of lovers. Although not handsome, he was always irresistible to women. Long after the bitter ending of their nine-year alliance, the Australian expatriate painter Stella Bowen, the mother of one of his three daughters, could still write of the "tremendous attraction of his gorgeous mind. . . ."

Ford had led a life of broad womanizing, his changing lovers both ancillary and critical to his creative output. But when Biala met Ford, he was a womanizer—and consequently a writer—in a dry spell. His affair with Rhys had rocked his relationship with Bowen, who finally threw him over when she learned of his next dalliance, with St. Louis socialite Rene Wright. And in a one-two punch, Wright—having divorced her husband only to find Ford wouldn't marry her—did, too. Never shy, Biala's first words to Ford were to express her disappointment that Pound was not there. But by the time they had spent the next night at dinner, followed by a tour of Paris boîtes, where they danced until dawn, she had forgotten all about Pound.

Her friends expressed shock when they discovered she had taken up with a man twice her age. "I have looked all my life for a man with a mind as old as my own," she blasted back. "And what difference does it make if, when I find the man, he has a potbelly!" Ford's friends were sooner amused, an amusement shot through with perhaps more than a trace of envy. When James Joyce, the godfather to Bowen and Ford's daughter, Julia, was introduced to this latest conquest—five-foot-two, slim-hipped, and very coquettish—he raced to report his findings to a mutual friend. He said he was unsure whether this was Ford's "eighth or eighteenth wife," but he was sure of his friend's sexual prowess, to which he paid tribute by rejiggering the words of a popular song: "O Father O'Ford, you've a masterful way with you / Maid, wife, and widow are wild to make hay with you / Blonde and brunette turn-about run away with you / You've such a way with you, Father O'Ford."

Ford was more than just a sexual predator, though. As one of his characters says in *Parade's End:* "You seduced a woman in

BLOCK PARTY
One of Biala's intimate domestic interiors, *The Blue Kitchen* (undated). Biala became a great cook, taught by her lover Ford Madox Ford.

DIFFERENT STROKES
"I belong where my easel is," said Biala, in her studio in Peapack, New Jersey, 1956.

ON DECK
Biala and her husband Daniel Brustlein, known as Alain, en route to France, 1947.

SHADOW PLAY
Silhouette Noire (undated).

order to be able to finish your talks with her. You could not do that without living with her. You could not live with her without seducing her; but that was the by-product. The point is that you can't otherwise talk. You can't finish talks at street corners; in museums; even in drawing-rooms. You mayn't be in the mood when she is in the mood—for the intimate conversation that means the final communion of your souls." In Biala, he found that communion, and in Ford, "humane, generous, kind," she found a redeemer—and the best mentor imaginable.

While Ford's previous loves had played the role of "consort to another and more important artist," as Bowen had described herself, Ford and Biala fell naturally into an equal partnership that extended beyond their respective careers to housework, cooking, gardening. It helped that neither cared much for bourgeois comforts. Ford liked to say that he hated comfort but loved luxury. They owned no house, had little in the way of possessions and were always strapped for cash. Food and wine, however, were taken very seriously. A famously good cook, Ford taught Biala to be one also.

When they weren't traveling all over Europe and America, where Biala would paint while the couple tried to generate income from Ford's teaching and writing assignments, they lived mostly in Cap Brun, outside Toulon, subletting the ground floor and garden of a rundown villa whose best feature was a "long terrace, giving over the foam of the Mediterranean." Ford admitted cheerily that living conditions at the Villa Paul, with no indoor plumbing or electricity, were "troglodytic." But if the constant houseguests groused, it didn't stop them from coming.

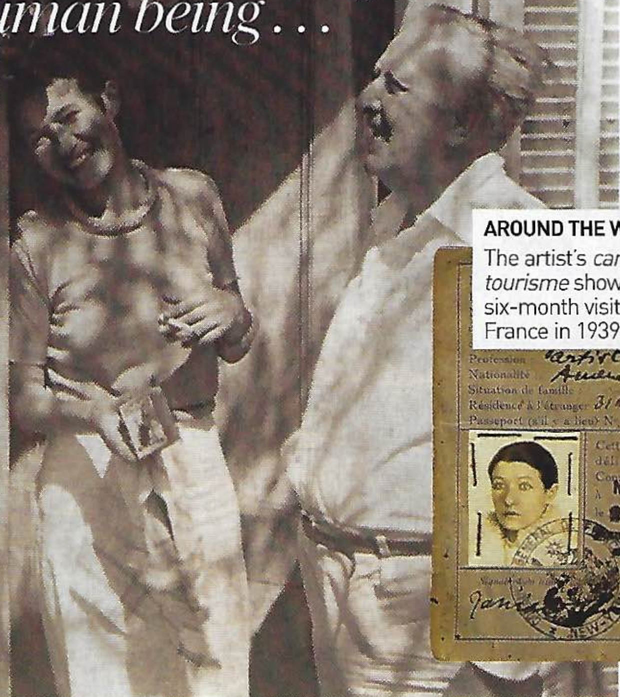
Seeing Biala's work around this time, the writer Katherine Anne Porter described her as a "really serious good painter," a judgment seconded by Theodore Dreiser, who wrote a catalog essay to a show in New York in 1937. "This Biala is doing things," he enthused. "Nothing escapes . . . her revolving, camera eye." Indeed, the subjects for the show's portraits and figurative landscapes were all that came before her lens in her life with Ford—Ford himself, his daughter Julia (a portrait Porter bought), and scenes of Paris, New York, and other places they had traveled to.

Porter was less certain what to make of the woman herself and described all the contradictions with which Biala's character was etched. "Janice is a little creature, thin, young, and too much acquainted with hardship and trouble for her years, abrupt, courageous, and baffled. Very mature in her feelings, uninformed, full of Jewish melancholy. . . . She hasn't an atom of frivolity in her but a very caustic and clever humor. . . ." Except for the

Clockwise, from top left: Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York; RUDY BURCKHARDT, Courtesy of the estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York (2).

SULTRY SUMMER
Posing at Villa Paul, Cap Brun, for a photo attributed to Ford.

BLOOMSDAY
Deux Tulipes, 1991.



Of Ford Madox Ford she said, "He found a little handful of dust and turned it into a human being . . . "

A GRAND ALLIANCE
Biala and Ford at Villa Paul in 1934.

AROUND THE WORLD
The artist's *carte de tourisme* shows her six-month visit to France in 1939.

point about frivolity—Biala could be playful and great fun to be around—Porter got it right. Regardless, Ford embraced Biala's idiosyncratic nature and was transformed by her presence in his life. When the poet Robert Lowell came to call, he found a Ford who could not have been happier to be "the old master still in harness. . . . Bohemian, newly married, and in France."

Quite a lot about this woman whose love had so reinvigorated him would find its way into the eleven books Ford would publish during their time together. She flourished, too, as he filled up her life and canvases, including one in which her model lay in a hammock, potbelly in high relief, reading a book on her hero Cézanne.

"He wanted us always to be together, side by side in everything, before the world," she wrote. It was Ford who arranged her first solo show in New York, and Biala who took over the managing of his often messy affairs with publishers. "Your letters," she chided one, "are in the tone of a person repelling beggars. This is not the way to write to a person of Ford's standing. . . ." "The fact that she had that kind of self-confidence is mind-boggling to me," says Helen Tworkov. "She was so young and so far out of her league." Biala never seemed to think so. "Anyone could talk to Picasso," she said. And she was equally unfazed when everyone from Joyce to Pound showed up for lunch. She never hesitated to speak her mind, excoriating Pound when he became a Fascist sympathizer, and pronouncing Gertrude Stein "an angry bitch."

"Biala was a woman of declarative opinions," says Helen. "There was not a lot of gray. She could be sassy, overreactive, dismissive." But her abrasiveness coexisted with a capacity for kindness, generosity, and loyalty. And her warmth and charm came through in her work and friendships. Ford considered her "an unexpected and undeserved gift" for which he was full of gratitude. But their "long passionate dialogue," as Biala expressed it, came to an abrupt end in June 1939, when he died in Biala's arms at a Deauville hospital at the age of 66.

In that instant, "grounded in pain," as she described her feelings in a letter, Biala nonetheless knew she would have to get on with it, if only because her beloved would have wanted her to. She snipped off a lock of "his beautiful hair," tossed a bouquet garni on his grave, and tried to think where to turn. The intensifying Nazi threat made the decision for her. With the pluck and good luck that often attended her, she found passage on what she said was the last ship out of town, which she risked missing when she detoured to the Villa Paul to rescue Ford's papers and manuscripts. He had made her his literary executor, and for the rest of her life she would remain the faithful keeper of Ford's flame.

She arrived this second time in America in the wave of refugees fleeing Hitler. Her brother, Jack, by then a well-established painter in New York, could provide *(continued on page 164)*

Clockwise, from top left: Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York (2); Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala; Courtesy of the estate of Janice Biala and Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

(continued from page 137)

comfort—and entrée. He helped with gallery connections and introduced her into his circle, which included de Kooning, whose studio was next door to his on East Tenth Street. "I can only say how fresh and bright and swift I find her total magic," wrote the Pulitzer Prize–winning writer Carl Van Doren of her first New York show after her return. But if she was professionally on track, emotionally she was reeling—from the loss of Ford, the world at war, and her struggles to readjust to life in New York. That was what led her, longing for sea air, to take a sketchbook and a bottle of whiskey to Coney Island one afternoon. As she drew, a man, tall and very handsome, tapped her on the shoulder. He only wanted to say that he, too, was an artist. She had turned around to meet her next "redeemer."

Born in 1904 in the Alsatian town of Mulhouse, Daniel Brustlein was a descendant of George Frideric Handel's sister, his closest claim to fame. Having come to this country in 1925 after studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Geneva, he brought Handel's cello, which he had inherited, a minor musical talent, and a major artistic one. Originally a textile designer, he later worked as a commercial artist until 1931, when he was hired to draw cartoons and covers for *The New Yorker,* which he signed "Alain." Alain, as almost everyone called him from then on, proved himself a master at the art of the cartoon, the clean black-and-white line, the one or two facts that can be manipulated in a comic way. Having successfully mined the carnival atmosphere of Coney Island's beach and boardwalk for ideas in the past, he was again seeking inspiration on that day.

Alain and Biala were married at New York's City Hall on July 11, 1942, and, as soon as they could after the war ended, they left for Paris. From the moment they arrived, Biala said, "I felt as if I had come home." It reminded her of her native village, she said, "the same smells of bread baking, the dogs going around in a very busy way. . . ." But they could not yet put down roots. Postwar immigration laws kept them shuttling back and forth between New York and France for the next decade. In 1960, finally legally free to stay, they bought a house at 8, rue du Général Bertrand, in the seventh arrondissement, actually a converted stable reached through a courtyard hidden behind an apartment building. They added a second floor for side-by-side studios. "This wonderful, magical, strange little house just reeked of all of her history and genuineness," recalled Nancy Rosen, an art adviser and close friend. "It was just beautiful in a very real and modest way."

Every inch of the house, from a pot of flowers on the table to the dishes in a breakfront, found its way into the intimate and lyric works Biala painted there, reminiscent of Pierre Bonnard but also seemingly inflected with Paul Klee. In the early years her subjects had been mostly landscapes and interiors; she veered into more abstract work in the fifties. But with this first real home it was if she had finally found a place to come inside, to look in but also to gaze out—into the courtyard, to capture the conifer she had transplanted outside the front door, or from the window of the *The Blue Kitchen* to turn her imaginative scrutiny to the Paris housefronts that John Russell called "small encyclopedias of European life" in a *New York Times* review of Biala in 1985.

When not painting, she collaborated with Alain on half a dozen well-received children's books and traveled through Egypt and India and all over Western Europe. In Paris they were surrounded by what they loved: books, music, cats, good food, and friends. "They lived simply, but it was gracious living," recalled Shirley Jaffe, an American expatriate painter who knew Biala for more than 40 of the Paris years. "Mealtime," she added, "was essentially important." Guests marveled not only at the impressive quality of her cooking but at how she was able to produce it in so tiny and ill-equipped a kitchen.

And, too, they marveled at her work. The photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, who befriended the Brustleins in 1947, had this to say in a catalog essay he wrote for a 1977 show: "I like Biala's attitude—her sense of color, of form, her aesthetic rigor, her perpetual disquiet. Her painting . . . has a gravity and exaltation." He was among the writers, artists, next-door neighbors, friends, or family members from America who all crowded in for dinners around the rickety table. "She attracted people," said Jaffe. "They flocked around her. She had a presence that you didn't ignore." Alain, more retiring, loved it when Biala held the stage.

"Theirs was an old-fashioned Bohemian life in Paris," said Helen. "She couldn't have cared less about comfort to an astonishing degree." Her nieces urged them to make home improvements, but this held no appeal. Luxuries, though, as Ford had taught her, were another matter. Biala visited the dressmaker next door to have the hotly colored silks she brought back from India turned into blouses and dresses.

When she donned her featherlight white broadtail-lamb coat for an evening out and enveloped herself in a cloud of her favorite perfume, Guerlain's L'Heure Bleue, the effect, said her niece Hermine Ford, could be quite seductive. But even in the more no-nonsense pants and shirts she usually wore, with her dazzling smile and girlish figure she remained attractive and always intensely feminine even into old age, as recalled by the director Arthur Penn, who became a friend and collector, and who spoke at Biala's memorial service. The critic Michael Brenson describes her as "the sexiest 90-year-old I've ever been around." He was also deeply impressed to see a woman of her age painting and doing housework, shopping and cooking—and without complaint.

This, too, was part of what Ford taught her early on. She had followed his credo, taken from a Spanish proverb, that the only way to live was to "do what you want and take what you get for doing it and no complaints." Asked to participate in a 1995 documentary film about American women artists living in Paris, Biala, then 92, who in eight decades as a painter had never painted a self-portrait and hated being asked to go over the past, finally stood back to assess the canvas of her life. She pronounced it a good one. "I lived the kind of life I wanted to live," she said, her smile widening, her blue eyes twinkling, "and where I wanted to live it." □

COMIC TIMING

(continued from page 146)

"The record definitely has a sense of me singing *to* someone," says Foxx. "All the songs are geared toward a woman listening." Suddenly, he begins to quietly croon one of the tracks: "Got nothing but my T-shirt and boxers on / Waiting for you to get home / It's been sunny outside all day, babe / I can't wait for it to storm / Let me feel your raindrops falling down / All on me. . . ." The younger producers he worked with (Foxx is 38) told him, "This is what you've got to do, Foxx, if you want to have a good record. You can't do the record for no reason. Or just a party-in-the-club record. It has to be personal." In other words, Eddie Murphy's 1985