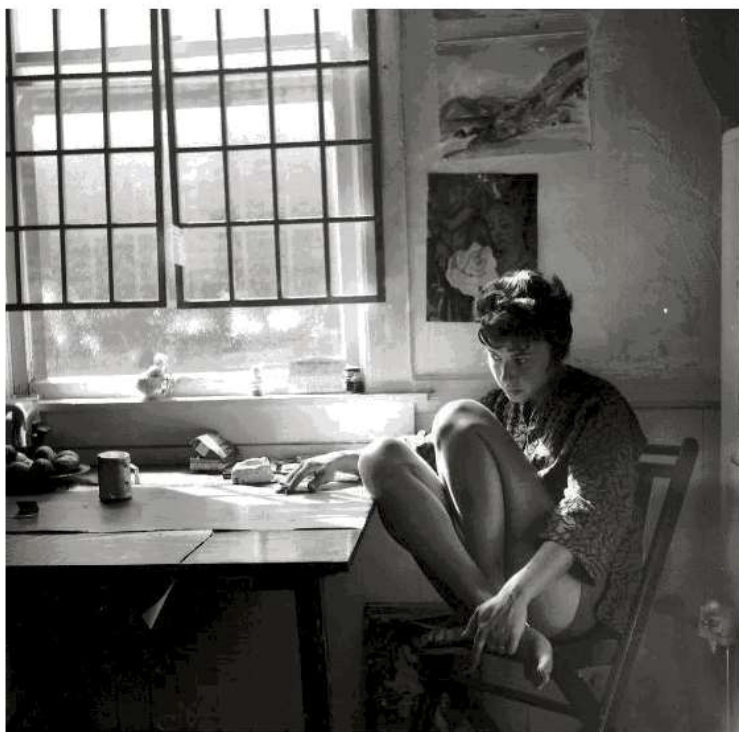


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Romance of the Rose: On Jay DeFeo

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DeFeo, 1960. Photo via the Whitney Museum of American Art.

“Civilization,” Gertrude Stein says, “begins with a rose.” And also: “It continues with blooming and it fastens clearly upon excellent examples.”

You understand what she means when you stand before Jay DeFeo’s massive painting *The Rose*, a two-ton, twelve-foot-tall canvas sculpted in oil, wood, and mica, a bold burst of grisaille. At the Whitney Museum of Art, where the work is part of the permanent collection, it hangs like an altarpiece, the focal point of a retrospective of DeFeo’s art.

The Rose was nearly a decade in the making: it is art as uncannily beautiful obsession/compulsion. By the time DeFeo had to leave the San Francisco studio where she had been working on the painting, it had become too large to be carried through the door, requiring the removal of a window and the use of a forklift. (The Whitney is screening *THE WHITE ROSE*, Bruce Connor’s short film documenting that process, as part of the retrospective.)

Part of the 1950s West Coast counterculture, DeFeo was there when Allen Ginsberg read *Howl* for the first time. (Her husband, the artist Wally Hedrick, was one of the founders of the Six Gallery, the site of *Howl*’s debut.) In some ways, her work echoed the Beats: *The Rose*, in its making, is one continuous

poem, bound up with the artist's body no less than Ginsberg's long poem, which takes the writer's breath as the singular measure of its lines.

At first, it was called *Deathrose*. DeFeo began working on the painting in 1958 and did not stop until eight years later. The name change might be taken as suggestion that *The Rose* came alive, ceased, in the course of its development, to speak to death, or, more precisely, to death alone. At least some of the interest of the work—of DeFeo's oeuvre as a whole—lies in the way it excavates the territory between Eros and Thanatos. The rose is, in Greek mythology, associated with Aphrodite, who is often shown with roses garlanding her hair. It is the flower that most readily stands in for the female body, for female sexuality. But DeFeo's *Rose* is not the bloom of purity, not the blush of first desire. It is more vagina dentata, an alluring but dangerous trap, a pleasure and a menace.

It is easy, looking at this monumental painting, to imagine just how DeFeo came to be so relentlessly committed to it. You cannot simply walk past it, cannot cast a passing glance. *The Rose* demands attention. DeFeo worked on it every day, adding and scraping paint away, then doing it again, over and over and over. It was her *Moby-Dick*, her *Godot*.

Except no, that's not quite right. She finished the seemingly interminable project, and she kept working, despite a period of dissolute depression that followed the demise of her marriage, the sinking of her art-world fortunes, the excessive drinking, the bout of gum disease. The Whitney show triumphantly speaks to her prolific imagination, her abundance of technique. *The Rose*, with its built-in mythology, its gargantuan ambition and stunning payoff, hogs the limelight, but other, smaller works also shine.

DeFeo is the sort of artist who could and did use an old dental bridge as a starting point for a series of works that casts it as a half-whimsical, half-heartbreaking shape-shifter. In *Study for a Crescent Bridge (my model...out of my own head!)* (1971), the bridge resembles an alien spaceship. In *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)* (1973), a photo collage—a medium DeFeo used often and well—the bridge clones itself haphazardly, producing a strange mountain range, which resembles, from certain angles, a pile of buttocks. And in *September Blackberries* (1973), rendered in synthetic polymer, the bridge is abstracted and remade into a peculiar bowl of fruit, lavishly baroque cornucopia replaced by angular monochrome.

In these pieces, DeFeo amalgamates technical mastery with a keen wit, humor that is often at her own expense. A suite of gelatin silver prints makes use of cauliflower heads, sumptuously presented on silver salvers. As still lives, these are amusing. But as a self-referential joke, a cabbage standing in for a rose, these are smart and sardonic and strangely powerful. (A 1975 mixed-media piece makes the joke more explicit: it is entitled *Cabbage Rose*.)

It is perhaps tempting to read into DeFeo's work a protest or a critique. As a female artist working in the sixties and seventies and eighties, she must have experienced terrible frustration as her male peers garnered acclaim and her own art went relatively ignored. The Sisyphean aspect of *The Rose* turned out to relate not to its completion but to its visibility. The painting deteriorated for years behind a false wall at the San Francisco Art Institute, covered in plaster, unseen. It became an urban legend of sorts, a mythical rumor. It was consigned to a kind of living death. In her catalog essay, the curator Dana Miller likens this fate to Sleeping Beauty's; the Whitney played Prince Charming, kissing the painting back to life by having it restored, secured with a new backing able to bear its load of paint and other materials, and exhibiting it in 1995.

DeFeo's early works—many dating from an especially prolific period in the 1950s when, during a postcollege summer sojourn in Florence, she turned out more than two hundred works in the course of three months—make use of color, particularly a vivid red. As her palate became progressively more muted (though the red returns in occasional bursts in late works, like *Geisha I* [1987]), her aesthetic became more refined. The works have a subtlety; they speak in a whisper, in hushed tones. But the story they tell is terrifically compelling.

Some of the most compelling moments in that story unfold in photographs of DeFeo in front of her work. Some of the pictures were taken by DeFeo's friend the assemblage artist Wallace Berman: the most striking of these images show a naked DeFeo posed against *The Rose*, recreating da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. But the pose also suggests the Crucifixion, in what is perhaps a sly nod to how much the work demanded of her. But, as the Whitney retrospective demonstrates, DeFeo resurrected herself, making work more than twenty years following *The Rose*'s completion.

DeFeo died in 1989, at the age of sixty. She worked until the very end, the scale of the art smaller, but the compositions no less thoughtful, no less lovely. In a photograph taken after she had begun a course of chemotherapy following her lung cancer diagnosis, DeFeo sits in front of one of her paintings. Her hair is gone, her eyes closed. But her posture is ramrod straight, determined. She's not going anywhere.

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