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ART REVIEW

Not Just 'The Rose,' but Also the Garden

'Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective,' at the Whitney

Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

"The Rose," one of the works in "Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. More Photos »

By HOLLAND COTTER
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"Anything for Jay" is a phrase that Dana Miller, the curator of "Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, heard time and again when asking for research help for the show. DeFeo, who died in 1989 at 60, was loved by people who knew her and esteemed by many who didn't. And you understand why from this exhibition, which is as tenderly shaped and as visually stirring as a career survey could possibly be.

A lifelong resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, DeFeo is famous for a single work, a gargantuan painting — nearly 12 feet tall — called "The Rose," which she labored on exhaustingly for eight years. The piece was, among many other things, a Sisyphean act of self-editing, a process carried out day after day, applying pigment, scraping it off, adding more, all the while carving into an ever-thickening surface to create the equivalent of sculptural relief.

By 1965, when a rent increase forced DeFeo out of her second-floor studio, "The Rose" weighed close to a ton. The only way to move it was to cut out part of the building's front

wall and extract the painting with a forklift. It was stored briefly in a museum and shown a few times before finding a home in a conference room at the San Francisco Art Institute. It stayed there for nearly a quarter-century, eventually hidden behind a protective false wall, until the Whitney acquired it in 1995.

Understandably, it's the centerpiece of the show that Ms. Miller, curator of the Whitney's permanent collection, has assembled. In its original studio setting, the painting stood in a bay window, with sunlight and street lamplight from two side windows raking across it. At the Whitney it is similarly lighted, emphasizing its sculptural texture and heft.

With its burst of volumetric rays shooting outward from a central point and dissolving into a roiling, petal-like cloud, it's an awesome sight, but a complicated one. Neither truly botanical nor purely abstract, it's ambiguous in its moral intentions, the way mystical visions are said to be. It's like Bernini's "Ecstasy of Saint Theresa" with the figures removed but the aggressive, stabbing ecstasy intact. As a 20th-century American masterpiece, it's at least as radical and innovative as anything coming out of New York art at that time

In the absence of other evidence, people tend to see "The Rose" as the sum of DeFeo's accomplishment, and to that view the show says no. There's more, and different. "The Rose" may have been the pivotal point of her career — the artist herself said as much — but streams of inventive work flowed toward it and from it.

The story starts in the early 1950s, when DeFeo, fresh from art school at the University of California, Berkeley, was in Europe on a grant. Fully up-to-date on trends at home, namely Abstract Expressionism, she was making the trip to see art from the past, and she pursued it avidly before hunkering down for a studio summer in Florence, Italy.

There she turned out some 200 paintings on paper in three months. A few examples open the show, serving as modest signposts for directions she would take. Abstract Expressionist moves are there, but so are images, half-abstract, psycho-symbolic: flowers, bodies, eyes, wings, hearts and crosses that turn into floor plans and kites. An appetite for texture is clear in pictures that are basically about the thickness and thinness of paint.

There's color, but not for long. DeFeo later said that texture was for her what color was for other artists: the main, eye-holding, expressive element. That sounds right, as her surfaces percolate, and her palette leans toward grisaille.

Finally, there's a sense that any firm line between painting and sculpture is, for this determinedly unconventional and unsentimental artist, merely notional, if it ever existed at all.

Back in California in 1953, she made jewelry to support herself; married an artist, Wally Hedrick; and settled in San Francisco, a hot place to be. Beat culture was coalescing. Jazz was in the air. Art mavericks like Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner and Walter Hopps were

prowling the streets. Poetry was daily fare. When Allen Ginsberg first read “Howl” in an artist-run space that Hedrick helped found, DeFeo was in the room.

Gregarious and generous, she was at the center of many parties. And she was moving into high experimental gear, with work conceived on an extravagant scale. In an 11-foot-tall picture called “The Annunciation,” baroque eruptions of thick strokes in white, brown and sea-blue swarm upward to form a pair of giant wings.

In 1958, in a precisely opposite style, she produced a mural-like graphite drawing, seven feet across, of a huge pair of female eyes, probably her own — smolderingly alert, but blank.

She began painting “The Rose,” originally called “Deathrose,” the same year. Its existence quickly became a local legend. The legend spread to New York when Dorothy Miller, after talent scouting for the Museum of Modern Art, included DeFeo in the 1959 exhibition “Sixteen Americans,” along with up-and-comers like Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Rauschenberg.

DeFeo didn’t go east for the show, nor, despite Miller’s urging, did she send “The Rose.” To her, it was strictly a work in progress, and so it would remain — through constant layering, chiseling, expanding and refining — for seven more years. It was still unfinished when it was hoisted out of the studio, but by then much had changed in DeFeo’s world. The momentum of her career had died. Her marriage was over, her health shot. There was drinking, depression. For almost four years she stopped making art.

Then, around 1970, she started again, with an added medium, photography, and an unnerving new theme for her painting. While in retreat she had developed severe gum disease, which caused her to lose several teeth. A dentist used some of them to build an oral bridge for her. And even after she stopped using the bridge, she kept it as a kind of charm. It also became the subject of her first post-“Rose” art.

In photographs the bridge looks like a jeweled saint’s relic; in paintings, like the High Sierra; in collages, like a delicate cluster of fruit. At once bizarre, ornamental and deeply personal, it was, for her, an emblem of loss and rehabilitation — of crossing, with a ghost of a smile, from one stage of life to another.

Much of what follows over the next two decades develops from what the bridge was for the artist: a way to the ordinary, a surreal charge verging on visionary. This impulse underlies DeFeo’s photographs and photocollages from the 1970s, which are astonishingly varied and understudied; they form a mini-show within the retrospective. DeFeo’s black-and-white images of plants, derelict furniture and liquid spills, sometimes joined in collages, do what DeFeo’s art has always done: confuse the organic and the artificial, the lifelike and the abstract.

Drawings in a series from later in the 1970s are, effectively, portraits of the artist's camera tripods, which she invests with a gawky, robotic intelligence. Pliable gum erasers lying around the studio become, in sensuously stretched-out landscapes, "mountain peaks and crevices sighted incompletely and suddenly in the clearing of a mist," as the art historian Moira Roth describes them in the catalog.

In 1980 DeFeo landed a job teaching art at Mills College in Oakland. It was her first benefits-paying, full-time job. It earned her money enough to travel, and she did, first to Japan, and then, fulfilling an old dream, to sub-Saharan Africa. After years of using cheap acrylic, she returned to lusher, though harder-to-handle, oil paint. You can see her wrestling with it in a set of unusually ominous pictures from the mid-'80s, with big, dark forms suggesting beaked heads and spiky flowers.

Inspired by samurai helmets and magazine illustrations of sonic-boom shock-wave cones, these forms have something monstrous about them, increased by the presence, for the first time in decades, of high color: a jolt of yellow, a gush of red. Yet they are forceful things, characteristically labor-intensive, and they represent DeFeo's last engagement with the monumental mode that brought her fame.

In 1988 she received a diagnosis of lung cancer, underwent surgery and chemotherapy, and worked almost as prolifically as she had in that long-ago Florence summer. Her final pictures are lap-size: charcoal drawings referring to Africa, paintings of mountains to climb (she thought of her illness as a long, upward hike) and one of a hazy, gold flower, as warm-toned as a banked fire.

One of the last paintings, "Dove One," from 1989, is of an injured bird that DeFeo rescued and rushed, in a box, to a veterinarian's office, only to have it die. In her depiction the bird is all but disembodied: a flurry of paint-stroke "feathers," familiar from "The Annunciation," and a single large, black, absorptive eye.

At the time of DeFeo's death, "The Rose" was still sealed away behind its wall, rumored but invisible. It's what many visitors to the Whitney will be coming to see, and it's absolutely worth the trip. But so is the show as a whole, because it gives you something more than any one masterpiece can: the eye, mind and heart of an artist who never stood still, one you can count yourself lucky to know.

"Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective" continues through June 2 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212)570-3600, whitney.org.