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### Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective

by Dana Miller, with contributions by Michael Duncan, Corey Keller, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, and Greil Marcus  
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Reviewed by Paul Sternberger

Jay DeFeo's best-known painting, *The Rose*, is over ten feet high and encrusted with nearly a foot of oil paint, mica, and wood. The painting was a Herculean task, taking eight years of working and reworking beginning in 1958, and requiring a forklift and the dismantling of an exterior wall of the artist's studio to finally remove it for exhibition. Not only do the scale and effort in completing *The Rose* make it tempting to take as an easy representative of DeFeo's oeuvre, its history provides a seductive metaphor for the highs and lows in the artist's career—after being exhibited at a couple of venues in California, it ended up, in 1969, in a newly constructed conference room at the San Francisco Art Institute. By 1974 the work was sealed with a protective layer because of its deteriorating surface, and it was later entombed behind a false wall, remaining out of public view until 1995, the year it was acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art. Indeed, the Whitney itself has played a role in the mythologization of *The Rose*, giving the newly resurrected painting a primary place in the 1998 exhibition "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–65," and in 2003–04, making it the subject of an in-focus exhibition accompanied by a catalogue of essays extolling the work.<sup>1</sup> For the current recon-

sideration of the artist, a catalogue accompanying a major retrospective exhibition, Whitney curator and primary author Dana Miller takes on the task of looking much deeper than the predominating *Rose*-centered narrative of DeFeo's career.<sup>2</sup>

Miller meticulously describes DeFeo's career beyond *The Rose*, revealing the many creative paths the artist forged for herself, adroitly building a context for her life and oeuvre. Through careful research, Miller portrays an artist that was consistently self-reflective about the progression of her work, yet also shifting in the rhythms and motifs of her output, her scale vacillating from minute to vast, her forms blurring the biomorphic and the inorganic. Miller's essay is punctuated by insightful observations about DeFeo's formal process, often using deftly fashioned descriptions of specific works in particular media to point out subtle formal and conceptual connections between different bodies of work and recurring references over the course of the artist's career. DeFeo, whose range of media, scale, and references varied intensely, would often reengage themes and imagery in her work that had lain dormant for long periods.

Miller traces DeFeo's education through graduate studies in art at the University of California, Berkeley, a program heavily influenced by Hans Hofmann, where she was taught a keen formal awareness of the materials and structure of painting. At the same time, DeFeo's art historical studies intensified her interest in prehistoric and indigenous cultures whose emblematic imagery resonated with DeFeo's own mystical inclinations. In addition, she gained an awareness of East Coast

Abstract Expressionism through publications and friends at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) (16). According to Miller, a 1952 travel fellowship proved to be a seminal experience for DeFeo, highlighted by a half year in Florence making hundreds of quickly rendered tempera paintings that integrated Abstract Expressionist techniques with archetypal imagery she had distilled from her study of prehistoric art (16–18; 62–63). Miller describes the slowly building momentum of DeFeo's career upon returning to Berkeley in 1953, when the artist began exploring a variety of media and scales. This narrative works hand-in-hand with other valuable elements of the catalogue, such as a detailed chronology compiled by Diana Kamin and Meredith George Van Dyke, as well as an extensive bibliography and exhibition history.

The milieu of San Francisco looms large in DeFeo's biography as told by Miller and her fellow essayists. Michael Duncan's essay analyzes the larger context of the San Francisco cultural scene, and in his compelling analysis of DeFeo's place in the American art scene, he points out how different DeFeo's lyrically symbolic work was from that of many of her contemporaries. In contrast to the distanced, cool conceptualism of Frank Stella, Carl Andre, or Jasper Johns, DeFeo embraced what Duncan identifies as literary, psychological, and humanistic aspirations (61). Duncan explores these differences in aspiration as a factor of the context of San Francisco in the 1950s and early 1960s, with its unique economic, social, and literary forces that helped shape the art scene there. In 1954 DeFeo joined with

fellow artists, including her future husband Wally Hedrick, to found the collaborative Six Gallery. Both Miller and Duncan explain how Six Gallery would become a focal point of activity for the city's avant-garde, not just in visual art, but in literature, film, and music, with readings and performances by the likes of Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg (*Howl* was first read there) (19–20; 63–64). DeFeo and Hedrick's apartment and studio on Fillmore Street also was a hub for an enclave of artists, writers, musicians, and gallerists, and Duncan underscores the vitality of DeFeo's influential friendships with artists such as Joan Brown, Bruce Connor, and Wallace Berman.

DeFeo began to be invited to exhibit works in groundbreaking shows in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and she often made large scale paintings and drawings that included imagery that she would return to periodically throughout her career: mountains, botanical forms, and themes gleaned from literature and past religious art. Just as important as any imagery in DeFeo's work of the period are the intense textures and surface topographies of her paintings. The subtlety and variety of these features are described in eye-opening detail by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro in "When Material Becomes Art," an essay with passages as vividly crafted as the paintings themselves.

It was a key moment in DeFeo's career when her densely drawn works on paper and heavy, textural surfaces on canvas drew the attention of Dorothy Miller of the Museum of Modern Art as she scoured the West Coast looking for artists who merited inclusion in what would become the 1959–60 "Sixteen Americans" exhibition. DeFeo earned her place in the show, sharing the walls with artists such as Johns, Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, and Louise Nevelson. Despite the curator's pleas to include the still-unfinished *Rose* (which at that point was called by its working title *Deathrose*), DeFeo refused to send the work to MoMA—a puzzling decision, then and now. In her essay describing the MoMA show in the context of DeFeo's career, Dana Miller



Fig. 1. Jay DeFeo, *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)* (1973), photo collage with synthetic polymer and glue on paperboard, 14 1/2" x 19". Jay DeFeo Trust, Berkeley. © Jay DeFeo Trust.

takes the opportunity to question oft-made speculations about the significance of DeFeo's refusal to send *Deathrose*, as well as DeFeo and Hedrick's decision not to attend the opening (his work was also in the show). Some have stated that the artists gave away the airplane tickets MoMA provided (as Hedrick himself later claimed) and snubbed the museum as an act of disdain towards the New York art scene. Miller recounts that careful review of the lengthy correspondence reveals no evidence of plane tickets having been sent or any sign of antagonism toward the museum. More likely, Dana Miller suggests, financial restraints best explain the couple's absence at the opening, a speculation that Duncan restates (21–28; 68). DeFeo stayed in touch with Dorothy Miller, hoping that when *The Rose* was finally complete, the museum would purchase it. Nonetheless, as the catalogue reveals elsewhere, DeFeo and many of her friends did seem hesitant to embrace the opportunities offered them by the museum and commercial worlds, a tendency Duncan finds worthy of exploration. Perhaps in part the legacy

of the cantankerous CSFA faculty member Clyfford Still, skepticism of established institutions gripped many of the young San Francisco "No Generation" artists, as Duncan calls them, including DeFeo's friends Joan Brown, Connor, Berman, and Hedrick. Duncan depicts DeFeo and her colleagues as idealists, not particularly concerned with careerism (62, 68).

After the MoMA show, for much of the first half of the 1960s, DeFeo worked and reworked *The Rose*, applying paint, scraping and carving it away, thinking and rethinking the work that finally approached completion in 1965, just as a five-fold increase in rent forced DeFeo and Hedrick to leave Fillmore Street. In recounting the story, Miller underscores the significance of Bruce Connor's film *The White Rose*, which documented the extrication of the huge painting from the Fillmore studio. The film's brooding melodrama helped shape the *Rose*-centered mythology of DeFeo's life and work (30–31). Several unproductive years in the late 1960s and early 1970s are indicative of the ebb and flow of DeFeo's career. Despite some highpoints such as the long-in-coming exhibition of

*The Rose*, this period was a dark lull punctuated by an ended marriage, illness, depression, and drinking.

The momentum of DeFeo's output began to build again in the early 1970s, with paintings and drawings of abstracted organic forms, including a series of eerie works inspired by DeFeo's own dental bridge (she suffered from severe periodontal disease). Both Miller and Mancusi-Ungaro point out that when painting primarily in acrylic as she did in the 1970s, DeFeo's works tended to create a sense of space through more traditional modeling rather than through the sculptural surface of her earlier oil paintings, though Mancusi-Ungaro underscores the often unconventional lengths that the artist took to retain a sculptural quality in her paint (34–35, 83). This rendering of volume, coupled with DeFeo's career-long preference for a restrained palette, offers continuity among the growing array of media DeFeo explored more intensely in the 1970s.

Some of DeFeo's most intriguing work was created when she set her paint and pencil aside. As early as the mid-1950s, she had been making Dada-like collages with found photographic materials. Decades later, in the early 1970s, she renewed her exploration of collage and added photography to her repertoire as well. Photography seems like an apt medium to have captured DeFeo's attention at this point: its subtle tones resonate with her restrained palette, and it is decidedly nontextural, a contrast to the highly sculptural oil paintings of the previous decade. DeFeo's engagement of photography, a facet of the artist's oeuvre that has received relatively little attention, is the focus of Corey Keller's essay. Keller explores DeFeo's use of the medium not only to create dialogues with works in other media, but to create stand-alone photographic works of art. Supported by a 1973 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship that allowed her to purchase a medium format camera, DeFeo examined enigmatic subject matter in often surreal photographs, photocopies, and collages. Her imagery varied, from abstract photograms and

arrangements of unidentifiable fragments of older works of art, to ordinary objects extricated from her everyday life. Keller sensitively describes how DeFeo's use of straightforward photography, double exposures, solarization, and photo collage allowed the artist to bridge the objective and the subjective and to build symbolic resonances both internal and external (75–77). Banal objects, as Greil Marcus points out in his essay, were explored by DeFeo with a fetishistic intensity that perhaps reached its most surreal heights in works such as her 1973 *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)* (Fig. 1), in which she photographed and collaged her own disembodied teeth and dental bridge (57–58). As he addresses DeFeo's bursts of photographic activity, Marcus's essay is more exuberantly written than others in the catalogue, celebrating the artist's own exuberance that resulted in eruptions of creative activity and sometimes provocative titles (55).

In the mid-1970s, DeFeo's experimentation in increasingly varied media informed her work in paint, where forms and images of familiar objects from photos and collages inspired those in painting and drawing such as her *Loop*, *Tripod*, and *Shoetree* series. While her investigation of new media had led DeFeo on some new and promising paths through the 1970s, she still struggled professionally, straining to make ends meet with teaching jobs and finding little consistent support from dealers or grants. By the early 1980s, things had begun to shift as DeFeo enjoyed more commercial success, received prestigious awards and exhibitions, and landed a full-time teaching position at Mills College. At this time color and texture play larger roles in her work as she re-engaged oil painting on canvas, having abandoned it nearly a decade and a half earlier. As once before, travel abroad helped shape DeFeo's interests. Time in Asia intensified her interest in Japanese armor and woodblock prints and inspired abstract compositions of geometric and organic forms. And a trip to Africa with a stay, en route, back in Florence, led her to explore landscape metaphors in her late 1980s work. These

landscape references, particularly of mountains meant to be ascended, are poignant at a time when DeFeo had just been diagnosed with lung cancer and was managing to make works as she underwent a grueling regimen of treatment. Following her sixtieth birthday, she embarked on a series of works that built upon directions that punctuated her career: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. As with so much of her work, grand abstracted forms found influence in modest small-scale objects, here a small pink cup made by a friend. The series possesses a theme and title inspired by literature, in this case T. E. Lawrence's autobiography, and includes works of various scales and media. Even as she succumbed to the illness that would take her life in November 1989, DeFeo continued to explore new directions in imagery, texture, and expressive potential (42–47).

In his foreword, Whitney director Adam Weinberg underscores the museum's mission "to amplify," to champion and raise awareness of artists of lasting importance (7). While that recognition, as Weinberg acknowledges, can be late in coming, *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective* insightfully, intelligently, and emphatically confirms DeFeo's rightful place among key American artists of the second half of the twentieth century. •

**Paul Sternberger** is an Associate Professor of Art History at Rutgers University-Newark, and the author of numerous books and articles on American Art, and the history of photography, and design.

#### Notes

1. Jane Green and Leah Levy, eds. *Jay DeFeo and The Rose*. (Berkeley and London: Univ. of California Press; New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003).
2. The exhibition opened first at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Nov. 3, 2012 to Feb. 3, 2013, and then at the Whitney, Feb. 28 – June 2, 2013.