

GALLERIES

## Searching for Jay DeFeo (Again)



*Installation view, 'Jay DeFeo' at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY, 2014, with "White Shadow" (1972) second from left (all images courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY) (all images © 2014 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)*

Silhouetted against the bright San Francisco light, men gather, deliberating. Their outstretched arms hold up something twice their size, something heavy they're treating delicately. Wearing white jumpsuits, the men talk and laugh, but their words are lost, replaced by Miles Davis's lovelorn cries.

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

This is [Bruce Conner's take](#) on the 1965 removal of "The Rose" (1958–66), Jay DeFeo's infamous and monumental painting, after its eight-year creation in her Fillmore Street studio. But not until more than halfway through the seven-minute film do we actually see the artist herself, faceless as she looks down from the fire escape, swinging her legs nervously. Cut and she's dwarfed by her creation. Cut and she's lying atop the crated artwork as if waiting to be carried down with it. Cut and the men hoist "The Rose" directly out the wall with a crane. Cut and the men sit satisfied in the back of the truck that carts it away, while she remains in the apartment, an unimpressive figure blocking the light of the 12-foot hole.



*Jay DeFeo, "Untitled" (1972), gelatin silver print, 4 3/8 x 6 7/16 in (11.1 x 16.4 cm) (click to enlarge)*

"It sounds a little more dramatic than it actually was," DeFeo said in a [1976 oral history](#). "All this was done in the space of an afternoon ... A small truck could have done the job, but they sent over the biggest van that [they] had for it." The dominant history of DeFeo tells of how her life and career were packed up with that painting. By turns hyperbolic and contradictory, most writing treats "The Rose" like a curse: it broke up her marriage; it prevented her career from taking off; it was an anomaly and a masterpiece. DeFeo comes out of this narrative looking like a misunderstood martyr and naive visionary: she was legendary in the San Francisco art scene; she was an anti-art-establishment bohemian; she wasn't a good businesswoman; she was a muse; she was a one-hit wonder; she was a perfectionist; she was a slave to "The Rose"'s demands; she was obsessed.

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

It's this last word I find particularly problematic. Even in the catalogue for last year's [comprehensive retrospective](#) at the [Whitney Museum](#), an exhibition that took a wrecking ball to the myths surrounding DeFeo's career, every single one of the essays uses this word to describe her.



*Jay DeFeo, "Tuxedo Junction" (1965/1974), oil on paper mounted on painted Masonite; triptych, each panel: 48 3/4 x 32 1/2 in (123.8 x 82.6 cm)*

That's why a show like [the one currently up at Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#), which homes in on her post-"Rose" output until her death in 1989, is still direly important. The gallery curators have mined DeFeo's archives to present works never before exhibited, including photographs, photocopies, and collages, next to more well-known pieces such as "Tuxedo Junction" (1965/1974) and "Seven Pillars of Wisdom No. 6" (1989). Laid out according to subject rather than chronology, the effect is that of a forensic case study, tracing a path from the everyday objects she called her "models" to her "portraits" — incisive studies she made across media — to her paintings, where the original subject is less abstracted than obscured by the history of her experimentation and transformations.

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Beginning in 1970 DeFeo took diaristic photographs documenting her studio as works progressed and fastidiously annotated them. After buying a Hasselblad in 1973 and building a darkroom in her house, she found that photography could be more than an archival tool; it could supplant painting as her primary medium.

She may have turned to photography out of frustration with acrylic paint, which she was forced to use due to limited finances and space. In a 1975 journal entry she wrote of her “strange paint experiments – no doubt will ultimately frustrate a restorer. Acrylic and oil *do mix* if you use force! Have been trying everything to give the acrylic *body*, first egg shells, now bisquick & cornstarch.” The quote betrays not only her vision of her own deserved legacy, but also her sense of humor and intense willingness to experiment and adapt.

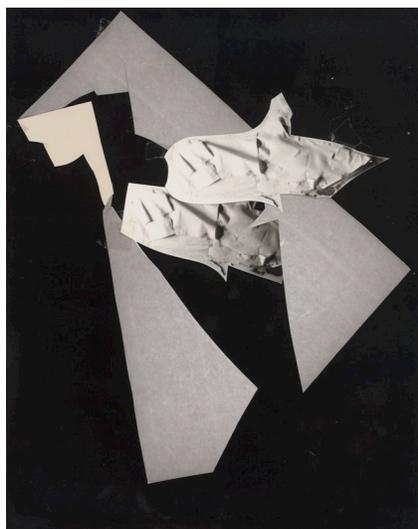


Jay DeFeo, “Lotus Eater No. 1” (1974), acrylic with collage on Masonite, 72 1/2 x 48 1/2 in (184.2 x 123.2 cm)  
([click to enlarge](#))

A [photograph from that same year](#) hangs in the Mitchell-Innes & Nash show. It shows a heap of eggshells in the corner, next to a masked canvas that will later become “Lotus Eater No. 1.” The final painting is also at the gallery, and is characteristic DeFeo — monumental yet fiercely compact, with

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gestures hemmed into a slick form. The enigmatic shape at the center has the form and violence of a bullet. The acrylic is thin but complex, and gains literal depth by way of collage and an embedded staple, leftover from her masking process. [Another photograph](#), this one from 1973, reveals her “model” for “Lotus Eater”: a candlestick telephone with a light bulb stuck in the receiver. Meanwhile two collages claim shards of the 1975 photograph and put them to surreal ends. The curators here take full advantage of DeFeo’s archival impulses; this is just one of the many genealogies they trace. DeFeo had cultivated a light-sensitive eye long before she started working with film. In a 1986 lecture she spoke about the raking light that would illuminate “The Rose” as it blocked her central bay window, enhancing the paint’s texture. “That edge became very important to me,” she said. Despite the thinness of its acrylic paint, a work like “White Shadow” (1972) shows her unwavering interest in that raking light in its eclipse-like form. And the photocopier, with its steady scan and thin, unskilled printing, may seem completely antithetical to DeFeo’s technique, but there are a slew of rarely seen photocopy works on view here. In fact, the process of the machine’s visualization is not unlike the positioning of “The Rose”: the subject — whether it’s a cup or a tissue box — blocks the light. DeFeo’s art is in the way light describes the edges.



*Jay DeFeo, “Untitled” (1975), photo collage with photocopy, 9 15/16 x 7 15/16 in (25.2 x 20.2 cm)*

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DeFeo may not have become known to a wider audience in her lifetime in part because her work is difficult to fit into the story of postwar art. The current show deals in subtleties, revealing that long past the build-up of “The Rose,” DeFeo’s work remained deeply layered. This is why it’s especially disappointing to read Walead Beshty’s romantic, hopelessly gendered essay in the catalogue, in which he personifies her subjects as lovers, her experiments as mystical infatuations. His interest in her art and archives is their proximity to her body, not her mind. He goes to great lengths to remove DeFeo as artist and to focus on her as woman: “Her act became anonymous like the slow work of nature, achieving the imperceptible rhythm of the tides rather than the volcanic expulsions of emotive power.” Or nurse: “By the time its completion neared, she was less the author of ‘The Rose’ than its humble steward, passing by to keep it whole and healthy ... ”

Did anyone say Giacometti was obsessive about his gaunt figures? Who would call Johns a servant to his flags? When does interest cross into passion, concept become compulsion, inspiration equal pathology? DeFeo is slowly making her way out of the empty frame “The Rose” left behind, but those charged with unpacking her history need be much more careful not to silhouette her in dramatic light. [Jay DeFeo](#) continues at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (534 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 7.