

JAY DE FEO 1929-1989

1984 Honorary doctorate, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA
1951 MA (painting) UC Berkeley
1950 BA (painting) UC Berkeley

Tree, 1953, mixed media collage (21 ½ x 29 ¾")

Untitled, 1960, crayon on paper (27 ¾ x 24")

*Jay De Feo was one of the most powerful San Francisco artists to emerge out of the rich ferment of the '50s, when Bay Area Figurative painting seemed to vie for dominance with Abstract Expressionism and both were challenged by the funky mixed-mediaists and assemblagists of "Beat" period North Beach.*¹

Born Mary Joan DeFeo in Hanover, New Hampshire, the artist acquired the nickname "Jay" in high school. From high school in San Jose, California, she went directly to Berkeley. In 1951 she received a Sigmund Heller Traveling Fellowship and left for a year-and-a-half of study in North Africa, Spain, France, and Italy. DeFeo taught at the San Francisco Art Institute, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and at Sonoma State College. In 1980 she joined the faculty at Mills College, Oakland, California. She was the Adaline Kent Award Winner at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1984.

DeFeo and her husband, fellow painter Wally Hedrick, were central figures in the group of artists associated with the Six Gallery and with the rise of assemblage on the West Coast. During the fifties, DeFeo regularly exhibited at the Ferus Gallery in L.A. She participated in the "Sixteen Americans" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an exhibition which introduced Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

According to Los Angeles Times critic Cathy Curtis, "The size of her [DeFeo's] work at any given moment had a lot to do with where she was living. Working in a large studio after her return from Europe, she made plaster sculptures; when the rent became prohibitive, she moved to a small apartment and began turning out jewelry and works on paper."²

DeFeo is perhaps best known for *The Rose*, a "mandala-like" painting which began as part of a series of large-scale works but evolved into a 2,300-pound hybrid (sculpture/painting). Critics disagree on just how long DeFeo worked on her "magnum opus," claiming anywhere from six to nine years, but all agree her passion bordered on obsession. Critic William Wilson observed it "had so much paint on it, it looked carved."³ Susan Kandel describes the object of DeFeo's obsession as, "Layer upon layer of paint, jewels, beads, wire, wood, and pearls—*The Rose* is a geological oddity, a honeycombed fever-dream, a pack rat's apotheosis."⁴

¹ Thomas Albright, "2,300-pound rose," ARTnews, May 1980, p. 710.

² Cathy Curtis, Los Angeles Times, July 16, 1990, p. F3.

³ Burt A. Folkart, Los Angeles Times, Nov. 15, 1989, P. A24.

⁴ Art Issues, March-April 1955, p. 37.

Following her completion of *The Rose*, DeFeo did not paint for six years, nor did she have a solo exhibition until 1974. It took working with collage, drawing, photography and photo collage to spark her creativity anew.

While known for her commitment to paint, DeFeo's influence extends to other areas as well. "...Her plaster sculptures prompted Manuel Neri to investigate the medium ... her collages and the elements of her environment deeply impressed Bruce Conner and Wallace Berman.... Conner considers her an influence on his own assemblage work and documented her passionate involvement with her art in the film *The White Rose*."⁵

Of her works on paper, Curtis says, "Most of these not-quite-paintings, not-quite-drawings look like images of real-life objects in the process of disappearing, or changing into another form. Sometimes it's difficult to figure out just what the original object was—either because it has become so blurred and fragmentary, or because the angle DeFeo chose was so unusual."⁶

DeFeo's work is also said to be "rich in interrelationships and contrasts: large and small shapes; light and dark; hard and curved lines; realism and abstraction; myth and the quotidian. Her compositions reveal the identity of images that are clear and known.... Many works also express DeFeo's lifelong meditations on vision, a concern with perception, recognition and identification, and a questioning of representation."⁷ Speaking of her own work, DeFeo states, "My ideas often emerge in response to materials and elements of chance. I enjoy investigating form, exploring the many possibilities of a visual idea. My early interest in black and white was triggered by Abstract Expressionism. I personally consider my palette to be one of limited color range. I am as interested in texture as in color, and texture is often closely connected to my choice of color. Photography is interesting to me for the same reason, and my work in photo collage emerged from that."⁸

DeFeo tells us, "Over the years I have worked either from the subjective world of my imagination, finding the image through my response to, and manipulation of the materials I work with or working from the objective world of reality . . . discovering the image among the relationships of forms in the common objects that I am using for models. The process becomes a play between my control over the materials and an open or permissive attitude toward technique, allowing it to mold the image as it will. Hopefully even the most literal drawings among the recent work transcend the definition of the objects from which they are derived. I enjoy the paradox of developing something quite organic while using inorganic models."⁹

Critics call DeFeo's work "mystical," "idiosyncratic," "quirky," "analytical," "disquieting," "primitive," "classical," "paradoxical," "haunting," and "resonant."

-Nancy Kiddie 2/00

⁵ *Artweek*, Nov. 23, 1989, p. 20.

⁶ Curtis, p. F1.

⁷ Docent File.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ As quoted by Henry T. Hopkins, Exhibition Catalog, University Art Museum, Berkeley, July-August 1978.

Jay DeFeo

- DeFeo began her university studies at age 16, the climate inspired her to work diligently/competitively in an academic world overwhelmingly dominated by men
 - Berkeley's curriculum was based on the academic model in which painting and drawing were separated - DeFeo resisted what she described as the "hierarchy of media" by mixing media and using unorthodox materials
- Style - works on paper
 - DeFeo's works on paper often blur the boundaries between drawing and painting
 - Complex layering of media still retains a sense of immediacy and spontaneity
 - Her drawings embody indeterminacy - the visibility of process (evidence of brushing, drawing, tearing, superimposing, erasing) describes both production and destruction
 - DeFeo's drawings are not studies for paintings, rather they supplant painting
 - Monumentality and seriality in her drawings borrow from traditional characteristics of painting
 - Geometric forms and gestural brushwork solicit associations with extrapictorial referents
 - Her compositions are derived from her environment
 - Her work frequently elicits metaphysical and mystical associations
 - DeFeo appropriates abstract expressionist techniques to create compositions that recuperate imagery
 - Her images insist on extant but indeterminate distinctions between figure and ground
 - DeFeo examines the pictorial and imagistic possibilities offered by a repertoire of fundamental forms including the cruciform, circle, and triangle
 - Complex and indeterminate constructions of pictorial space at times almost efface the distinction between figure and ground
 - Images simultaneously coalesce and dissolve

Source: *Jay DeFeo: Works on Paper*, Sidra Stich and Brigid Doherty, 1989