

Forbes

MAR 21, 2018 @ 06:56 PM

Chancing The Ridiculous, Jay DeFeo And Surrealism

Clayton Press

The Rat Bastard Protective Association was founded in 1957 by the artist Bruce Conner and the poet Michael McClure. As Conner told it to Peter Boswell, a seasoned curator, the association was “for people who were making things with the detritus of society, who themselves were ostracized or alienated from full involvement with society.” This community of artists and poets lived and worked together in and around 2322 Fillmore Street (San Francisco), which they dubbed “Painterland.” The idiosyncratic group included Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, Jean Conner, George Herms, Wally Hedrick and Jay DeFeo.



© 2018 The Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of The Jay DeFeo Foundation and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

Jay DeFeo. Untitled. 1973.

DeFeo, a New Hampshire native, grew up in the Bay area, and attended the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the early 1950’s. After traveling to Europe and

North Africa, DeFeo settled permanently in Northern California. It was a propitious moment in American culture. In 1953, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the poet, and Peter D. Martin, a sociologist, had opened City Lights booksellers. San Francisco became the quasi-West Coast capital of Beat culture, the home of “new bohemian hedonists who celebrated non-conformity and spontaneous creativity.” This was the cultural milieu for DeFeo.

DeFeo worked almost exclusively on *The Rose* from 1958 to 1966. (This painting may have been a true monomaniacal obsession. Monomaniacs are defined as rational people whose rationality is applied to a specific object, branch of knowledge or activity.) *The Rose* is DeFeo’s *Meisterstück* bar none, and it always has to be mentioned. (It is difficult to name more than one or two artists who worked so diligently and perhaps so compulsively on a single work of art. One notable example is Marcel Duchamp, who worked on *Étant donnés* for 20 years.) With the completion of *The Rose*, DeFeo took a studio hiatus from 1966 to 1969. When she resumed art making, she became deeply involved with photography, favoring “domestic oddities, which she transformed into images that, in her words, ‘transcend the definition of the objects from which they are derived.’” (Jay DeFeo writing to Henry Hopkins, June 21, 1978.)



© 2018 The Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of The Jay DeFeo Foundation and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

Jay DeFeo. Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape). 1973.

It is in the post-*Rose* period that DeFeo experimented with new techniques or applications, things like cameraless photography and collage. Bruce Conner, the Rat Bastard leader, had suggested that DeFeo take pictures of the “things [around her] and turn them into other stuff . . . collage things.”) As described in the exhibition’s catalog by Dana Miller, The Whitney Museum’s Director of the Collection, DeFeo’s experiments, which the artist described as play, “meant not only taking risks, but also, at key moments, sharing authorship with forces of nature, randomness, or accident.” The irony is how DeFeo would come to embrace chance after methodically working on *The Rose*—one work—for nearly eight years.

DeFeo's connection to Dada and Surrealism makes even more sense when you compare the artistic, literary and intellectual content of Zürich and Paris between the World Wars to the creative bursts of the Beat Generation in San Francisco. DeFeo remarked, “In those days there was play time and art time for me . . . I did a lot of postcard art before it had, you know, a name, and a lot of little collage stuff that way. Funny kind of sort of Dada joke stuff that I just did for entertainment and relief and release and fun.” DeFeo’s approach to collage was clearly “aligned with the Surrealists who saw play as a means of accessing the subconscious and tapping into an unfettered and authentic mode of thinking.” In fact, DeFeo found a specific connection with Duchamp and his alternate persona, Rose Sélavy (“*Eros, c’est la vie.*”).



© 2018 The Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of The Jay DeFeo Foundation and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

Jay DeFeo. Trap. 1972

Miller's enlightening essay explains the presence and essences of the works on display at Mitchell-Innes & Nash. She describes DeFeo's camera experiments as "resuscitating past creative efforts as a way of forging ahead [allowing DeFeo] to dive midstream into her often cyclical process of working, rather than having to begin afresh. . . capturing the remains of older work." DeFeo's experiments with chance can be seen in several photographs and collages at the gallery, but is superbly illustrated by *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)* 1973. In this work, DeFeo threw cutouts of photographic fragments of her extracted teeth and dental bridgework, into acrylic and glue on paper. It is like a collaged representation of "throwing the bones," a divination technique. Miller calls *Trap* (1972), an acrylic and graphite with collage on Masonite as:

"Perhaps the most providential example of chance intervening in DeFeo's work. A moth remains ensnared at the spot along the painting's ovoid contour where it landed on the surface and was unable to free itself. Rather than being the fly in the ointment, DeFeo saw it as a fortuitous occurrence. She wrote that it was "a 'chance happening' in the process of the work, around which I based the meaning of the piece."

Of the works in *Outrageous Fortune*, only three are from the 1950's. The remaining works are from the 70s and 80s. (DeFeo died in Oakland, CA in 1989.) The exhibition includes photographs, chemigrams, collages, drawings, and paintings. Fittingly, inside the gallery on the left is a small 3-1/2 by 4 inch cut gelatin silver print of a single flower, a rose. It is not the earliest work in the exhibition, but it is a fitting beginning. At the back of the gallery is DeFeo's *Bride* (1986), a large oil on paper mounted on canvas, an homage to *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, (The Large Glass)*, another of Duchamp's monomaniacal works, which he created between 1915 and 1923. *Bride* (1986) is a work far distant and apart from the Rat Bastard Protective Association. It is pure visual poetry.