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## FLOWER POWER

*A Jay DeFeo retrospective.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Most artists fail in what they try to do. The reasons range from an encyclopedia of faults and mistakes to the myriad variants of bad luck. The fact is too melancholy to tempt much contemplation. But, now and then, an aesthetic misadventure may be so peculiar, and so strangely resonant, that it transfixes, and its author becomes the cynosure of an empathetic cult. Such is the case of the gifted and bedeviled San Francisco artist Jay DeFeo, who died, of cancer, in 1989, at the age of sixty. Her tale is told in a fascinating retrospective, the first of her work, that opened last year at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and is now at the Whitney Museum. DeFeo's

career began, around 1951, with terrifically promising paintings. During the nineteen-seventies and eighties, she did fine work in painting, drawing, collage, and photography. In between, there's an abyss, occupied by a single, preposterous object: the painting relief called "The Rose" (1958-66), a composition more than ten and a half feet high and nearly a foot thick, weighing well over a ton, of radiating white ridges of palette-knife-carved paint which devolve into gray clumps, sparkling with bits of mica. DeFeo's seven years of constant toil on the painting came to an end (except for some desultory subsequent touches) only when she was evicted from her apartment, on

Fillmore Street, in November, 1965.

There had to be an "uncontrolled event to make it stop," DeFeo's friend the late artist Bruce Conner said of "The Rose," in an interview. DeFeo had worked on the painting in her apartment, and Conner had filmed the eviction, which entailed knocking out part of the wall around a window to remove it. DeFeo "had gotten so crazy," he said. "It was the end of Jay." He wondered whether she "was going to go out the window herself." The film shows her, a piquantly lovely woman, dangling her legs from a fire escape as she watches the defenestration. During the next four years of living in towns north of the city, she made almost no art at all. "The Rose" was shown twice in her lifetime—in 1969, at the Pasadena Art Museum and at SFMOMA—and then it was installed in a conference room of the San Francisco Art Institute. A protective wall concealed it for two decades, until it was retrieved and restored for a 1995 show at the Whitney, "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965." That show celebrated DeFeo's art and commemorated her role, as a friend and a muse, in the San Francisco literary world of the era. (She attended Allen Ginsberg's first public reading of "Howl," in 1955, at the Six Gallery, where works of hers hung.) "The Rose" is now in the Whitney's collection.

The starburst motif of the piece is generic and banal. Nothing that DeFeo did could transcend that, as she must have suspected, at times, while refusing to believe it. But, for sheer density of material and effort, there is nothing like "The Rose." You may not look at it so much as gawk at it, in the chapel-like black chamber, with dramatic lighting, that it commands in the show. It strikes me as neither good art nor bad but a sui-generis folly that lends itself to mythic reflections. I think of Balzac's short story "The Unknown Masterpiece" (1831), in which a master's long-labored crowning achievement, when finally revealed, is a chaos of paint, with just one of its female subject's feet legible. The artist, Frenhofer, destroys the picture and dies. The meaning seems clear: a warning against ambition that will brook no compromise with art's conventional limits—which, for the greatest artists, simply set in at exceptionally high levels. DeFeo was not a great artist. But the ferocity of her commit-

BURT GLINN/MAGNUM

*DeFeo in her San Francisco apartment, at work on "The Rose" in 1960.*

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

ment and the anguish of her frustration make her a totemic figure for people who can understand those sentiments from experience. Artists' voices are apt to drop in tone when she is mentioned.

DeFeo was born in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1929, the only child of an Italian-American medical student and a nurse from an Austrian immigrant family. In 1932, they moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where DeFeo's father enrolled in the Stanford University medical school. The marriage was tumultuous, and when DeFeo was four she spent a year in institutional care. After that, she was frequently sent to stay with her maternal grandparents, in rural Colorado. Her parents divorced in 1939, and DeFeo moved with her mother to San Jose. Mentored in art by a neighbor—a commercial artist named Michelangelo—and by a devoted high-school teacher, she went on to study art and art history at Berkeley, and to explore the blossoming art scene in San Francisco, where Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko taught, and Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis, David Park, and Elmer Bischoff were rising stars. Abstract Expressionism was the moment's watchword, and DeFeo embraced it.

In 1951, a fellowship staked her to a year in Europe. She travelled widely while tending to neglect sightseeing for chances to paint: she made more than two hundred works during three months in Florence. Back home, she took odd jobs. In 1953, a conviction for shoplifting two cans of paint got her fired from a position at the California College of Arts and Crafts, teaching art to children. She was making and selling jewelry—deft wire confections, which are sampled in the show—when she met and, in 1954, married the artist and Beat doyen Wally Hedrick, a proponent of what was described as “personalized Dada.” With some other artists, they shared a building on Fillmore Street that became a hotbed salon and party place, frequented by writers and jazz musicians. The artist Billy Al Bengston remembered DeFeo as having “style, moxie, natural beauty and more ‘balls’ than anyone.”

The first rooms of the Whitney show, featuring DeFeo's abstract paintings from the fifties, astonish. Previously unknown to me, the work is canny, sensitive, and dashing—world-class, in its day. DeFeo combined a sure grasp of Abstract Expressionism with a signature

emphasis on texture, building membranes of paint with thick, fast strokes that are as abrasive and as precise as the caress of a cat's tongue. Having little use for color, she excelled, too, at grisaille drawing, as witness a fantastic graphic rendering, seven feet wide, of her own blankly gazing eyes. Reportedly, she disparaged her draftsmanship; this makes me want to go back in time and shake her. DeFeo plainly had gifts equal to strong formal invention. I surmise that she was hampered by, even while being nurtured on, a scene that was dominated by men, including her husband, who steered art-making toward literary conceits and rapsallion gestures. It's conceivable that her withdrawal into obsessively reworking “The Rose” amounted to a tacit protest—a standup strike—against the pressures of her milieu.

DeFeo had divorced Hedrick and begun a thirteen-year relationship with a much younger man, and was teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute, when, in 1970, she got back to concerted studio work. She did so notably with photographs and paintings of her own dental bridge, which a gum disease had necessitated. Alternately grotesque and weirdly seductive, like a darkling grotto of sensuous forms, the images celebrate a triumph of rigorous aesthetic detachment over self-absorption. That remained the key, heroic quality of DeFeo's later work in several mediums, which lately, I am told, has made her a charismatic influence on numerous young artists, particularly women. Especially acute are painstaking drawings of odd objects—a camera tripod, heaped erasers, samurai armor—which appeal less to vision than to touch, as if they were excavated by hand from pictorial space.

DeFeo's life brightened. In 1987, she fulfilled a long-harbored dream of traveling to Africa, which led to a series of splendid, hieratically mysterious abstract drawings called “Reflections of Africa.” She stayed prolific after receiving a diagnosis of lung cancer, in 1988. Three hundred people attended her sixtieth-birthday party. One of them, the ceramist Ron Nagle, gave her a pink cup that she abstracted in several beautiful small paintings. The final work in the show, “Last Valentine” (1989), is of a heart shape in brown and white, with feathery strokes melting into a delicately ruffled, cream-white ground. It took my breath away. ♦