

BEYOND THE ROSE

**A current retrospective shifts focus to the work—
in a surprising range of mediums—that Jay DeFeo created
before and after her best-known painting.**

Jay DeFeo in
1960 working
on *Deathrose*,
the first title for
her painting *The
Rose*. Photo Burt
Glenn. © Magnum
Photos.

by Matthew Nichols

JAY DEFEO (1929-1989) is not exactly an obscure artist. A leading light of the small but thriving San Francisco art scene of the 1950s, she remains well known for creating *The Rose* (1958-66). That DeFeo labored over this fabled canvas for close to eight years, producing a painting of unrivaled heft and weight, only to see it deprived of an audience for most of her remaining life, goes a long way to explain the semi-tragic nature of her fame and the painting's persistent mystique. But while *The Rose* has secured DeFeo a place in many accounts of postwar American painting, it has also eclipsed awareness of the rest of her work.

Though it happened only after the artist's death, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York acquired *The Rose* in 1994, essentially rescuing it from decades of neglect and invisibility. The Whitney has since featured the restored painting in "Beat Culture and the New America, 1950-1965" (1995) and "The Ameri-

can Century" (2000). A more focused consideration came in 2003, when "Beside 'The Rose': Selected Works by Jay DeFeo" showcased the painting among a few other works by the artist. Now, Dana Miller, curator of the Whitney's permanent collection, has organized the first comprehensive survey of DeFeo's oeuvre. *The Rose* is an undeniable highlight of the exhibition, which opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in November. But this carefully plotted retrospective, which in San Francisco presented approximately 130 paintings, drawings, collages, photographs and a few small sculptures in eight galleries, explores the breadth and diversity of DeFeo's art.

A lifelong resident of the Bay Area, DeFeo studied fine art at the University of California in Berkeley, earning both her bachelor's and master's degrees by 1951. She spent the next 15 months in Europe on a travel fellowship, and the earliest works in the show date to

**CURRENTLY
ON VIEW**
"Jay DeFeo: A
Retrospective,"
at the Whitney
Museum of
American Art,
New York, through
June 2.

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this itinerant period. Though fairly small and executed on paper, these loosely brushed tempera and oil paintings demonstrate an awareness of Abstract Expressionism while often asserting cruciform shapes in vivid reds, golds and purples. Back in San Francisco by 1953, DeFeo met and soon married the artist Wally Hedrick, and began designing and selling jewelry for extra cash. Several of these brooches and pendants, which tend to loop silver or copper wire around a central bead or pearl, were also displayed in the first gallery.

In 1955 DeFeo and Hedrick moved to 2322 Fillmore Street, where they helped anchor an intimate community of San Francisco artists and poets. Significantly, their ample living and studio spaces allowed DeFeo to begin working on a much larger scale, and the numerous big paintings she produced between 1956 and 1960 are a major revelation of this show. Six of these canvases dominated the second gallery, most exceeding 10 feet in height, and together presented a range of formal experiments that would soon be consolidated in *The Rose*, including

Origin, 1956, oil on canvas, 92 by 79¾ inches. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.



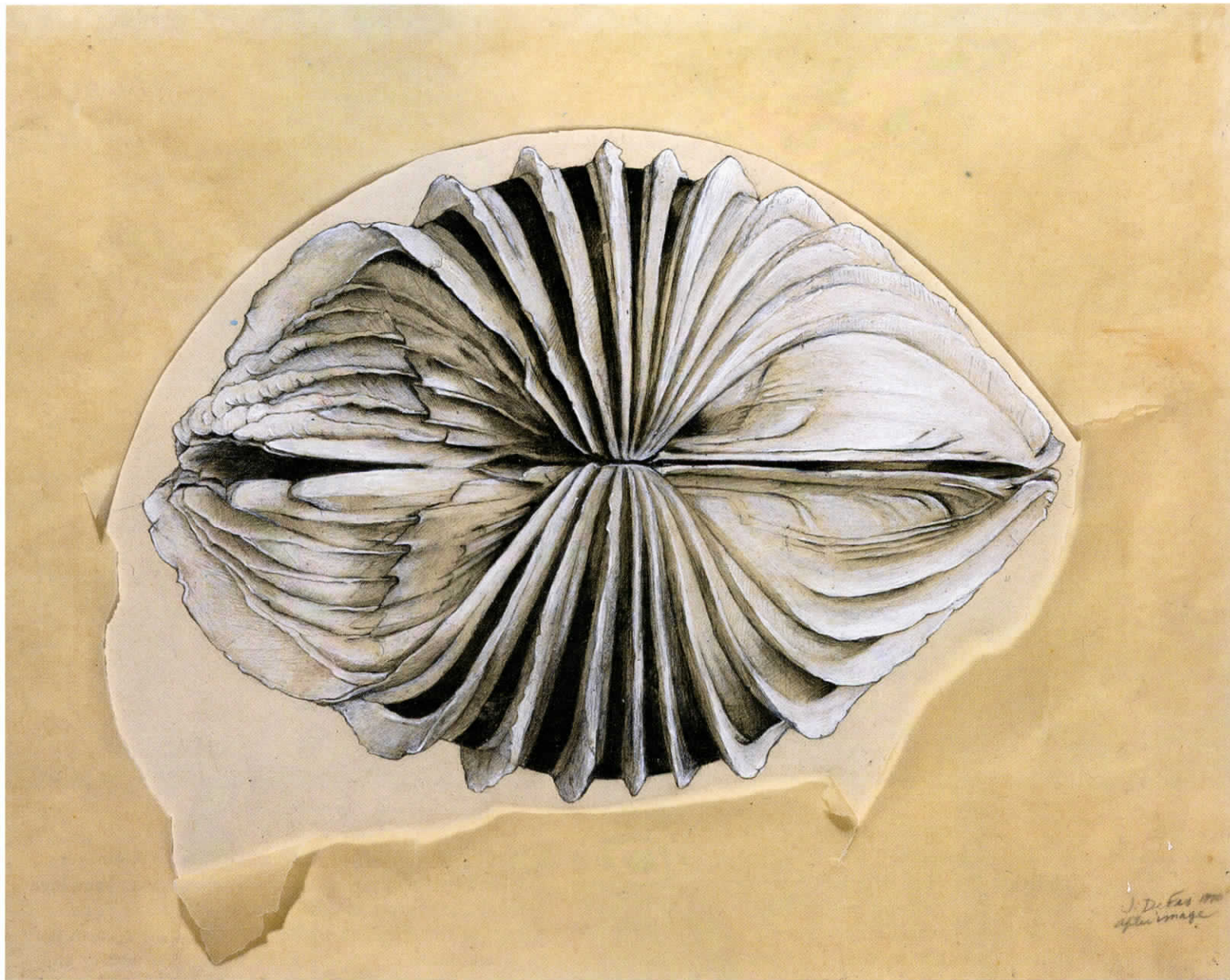
DeFeo's penchant for muted and mostly tonal palettes and her use of repetitive, directional mark-making to convey organic energies.

The earliest of these breakthrough works, fittingly titled *Origin*, was painted with a palette knife in 1956. By layering long, vertical strokes of creamy white and greenish gray on a roughly square canvas (92 by 79¾ inches), DeFeo evolved an abstraction that resembles tall grasses nodding in a breeze. A similar strategy governs *The Verónica*, a tall and narrow painting (approx. 11 by 3½ feet) from 1957, where warm creams and purpled browns are smeared across a dark umber ground. Here the palette knife is dragged from upper left to lower right, in strokes of varied length and width, resulting in a winglike form that appears hinged to the edge of the canvas. DeFeo's next painting, *The Annunciation* (1957/1959), basically doubled the width of *The Verónica*, so that two enormous wings seem to spread from a central spine. Although the title connotes angelic buoyancy, DeFeo's meaty strokes of cream, brown and Prussian blue describe, to my mind, the splayed carcass of a

large bird. Given the ambition and power of these early paintings, it is no surprise that MoMA curator Dorothy Miller tapped DeFeo for her landmark "Sixteen Americans" show after visiting her studio in the summer of 1959.

Two other large paintings in the second gallery anticipate the extraordinary thickness of *The Rose*. Conceived as a complement to *The Rose* and finished in 1959, *The Jewel* shares its counterpart's emphatic radial design. At its center, a starburst of white impasto protrudes a few inches from the surface before tapering off into faceted spokes of rust and deep red. Much more oil paint was used for *Incision*, the last painting DeFeo completed, in 1960, before turning her full attention to *The Rose*. Nearly monochromatic, this narrow canvas features a substantial, 9-inch-deep ridge of ash gray paint that is littered with bits of string. The craggy mass appears to slide downward, along a diagonal fault line, as if DeFeo had excised a cross section of tectonic activity.

The Rose acquired its own geologic presence from DeFeo's laborious painting process, which cycled through multiple campaigns of addition and subtraction between 1958 and 1966. Working with palette knives and masonry trowels, she slathered thick layers of mostly white and dark gray paint onto her canvas, and used the same tools to carve away at the growing relief as it dried. The protracted and fascinating evolution of *The Rose*, which famously reached a thickness of 11 inches and weighs over 1,800 pounds, has been chronicled in detail elsewhere (for example, see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '96, as well as the excellent catalogue for the current show). But it is worth noting here that the roughly 11-by-8-foot painting covered



J. DeFeo 1970
after image

a large bay window in DeFeo's Fillmore Street studio, limiting its natural light sources to two side windows. To approximate these conditions in the museum, Miller designed an oblong, dark gray gallery specifically for *The Rose*, and sent raking lights across the painting to enliven its variegated surface. Standing in this chapel-like space, one is freshly struck by the paradoxical impact of the painting: an immaterial and evanescent starburst seems to be embedded in a massive slab of stone. Improbably but convincingly, DeFeo created a fossil of light.

A SUDDEN EVICTION FROM the Fillmore Street studio in late 1965 hastened the end of DeFeo's work on *The Rose*, which was temporarily stored at the Pasadena Art Museum, briefly exhibited there in 1969, and then relocated to a conference room at the San Francisco Art Institute, where it eventually disappeared, for 20 years, behind a protective wall. Additionally, DeFeo's marriage

to Hedrick came apart at this time, and she had trouble securing new studio space, leading to a four-year hiatus from making art. When she resumed working around 1970, while living in Marin County, her drawings and paintings were more representational and tended to isolate and enlarge small objects. *After Image* (1970), for instance, is a finely wrought graphite and gouache drawing of a closed cockleshell bearing calcified ridges. Hung in the gallery adjacent to *The Rose*, the drawing's grisaille palette and radial striations provide echoes of the larger work. Mounted nearby were *Crescent Bridge I* and *II* (both 1970-72), two large acrylic paintings that depict the artist's false teeth. (Believing the lead content in oil paint contributed to her gum disease, she shifted to acrylics at this time.) Greatly enlarged and floating against white and black grounds, respectively, the dental bridges evade easy identification and loom, somewhat menacingly, like rows of glistening helmets.

After Image, 1970, graphite, gouache and transparent synthetic polymer on paper with cut-and-torn tracing paper, 14 by 19½ inches. Menil Collection, Houston.



Above, *Crescent Bridge I*, 1970-72, synthetic polymer and mixed mediums on plywood, 48 by 66½ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

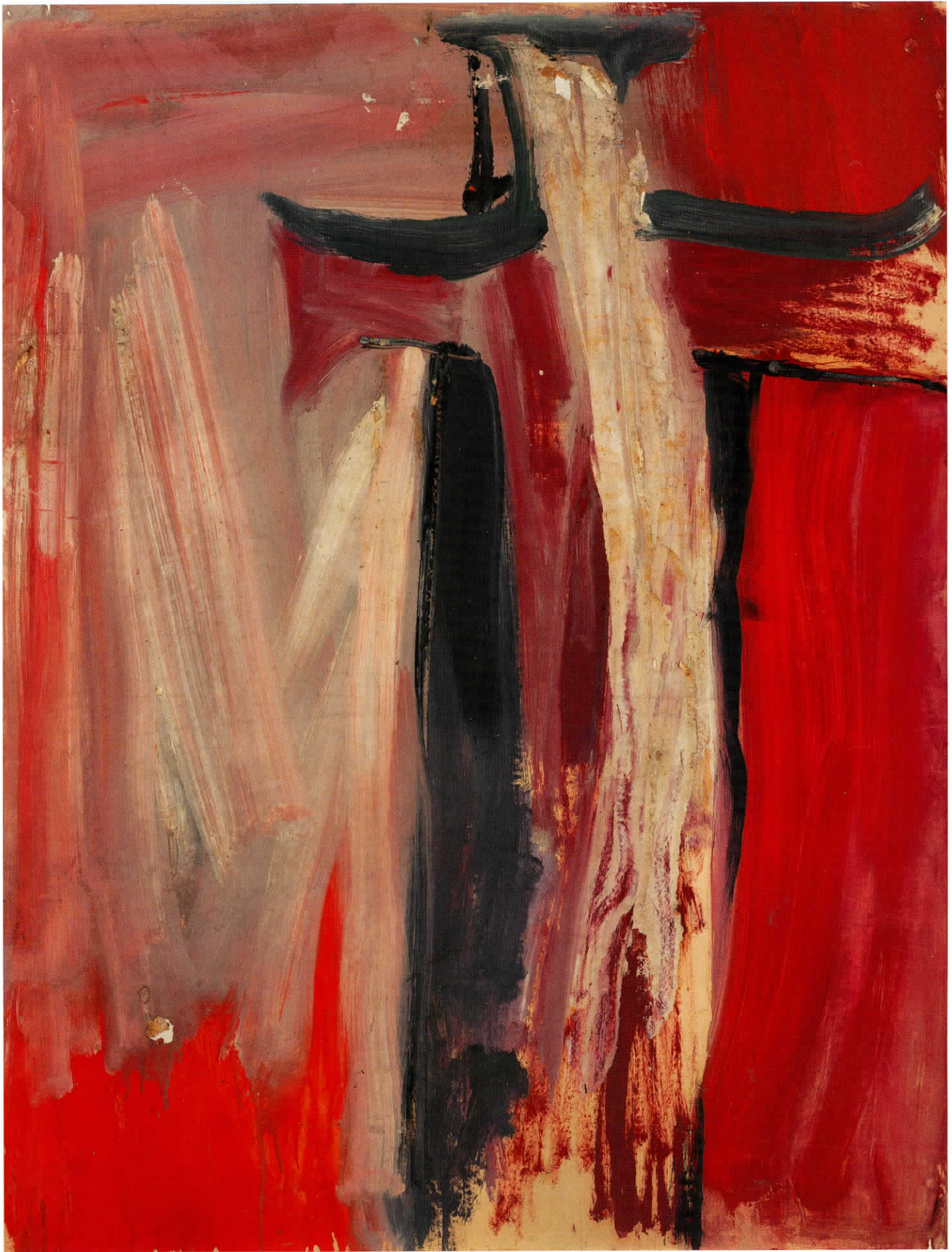
Opposite, *Untitled (Florence)*, 1952, tempera with collage on paper, 39¼ by 29½ inches. Mills College Art Museum, Oakland.

DeFeo based her “Crescent Bridge” paintings on a photograph of her false teeth. While teaching at various Bay Area colleges in the early 1970s, she learned basic darkroom techniques from her students and subsequently made photography an integral component of her work. In addition to using photographs as visual aids for drawings and paintings, DeFeo shot and printed many stand-alone images, conducted cameraless experiments with darkroom chemicals and, at the urging of Bruce Conner in 1973, began making photomontages. Some two dozen photographic works in the show testify to these promiscuous explorations. However, and unsurprisingly, they are all black-and-white, and many invite comparisons to the iconography and formal rhythms of her work in other mediums.

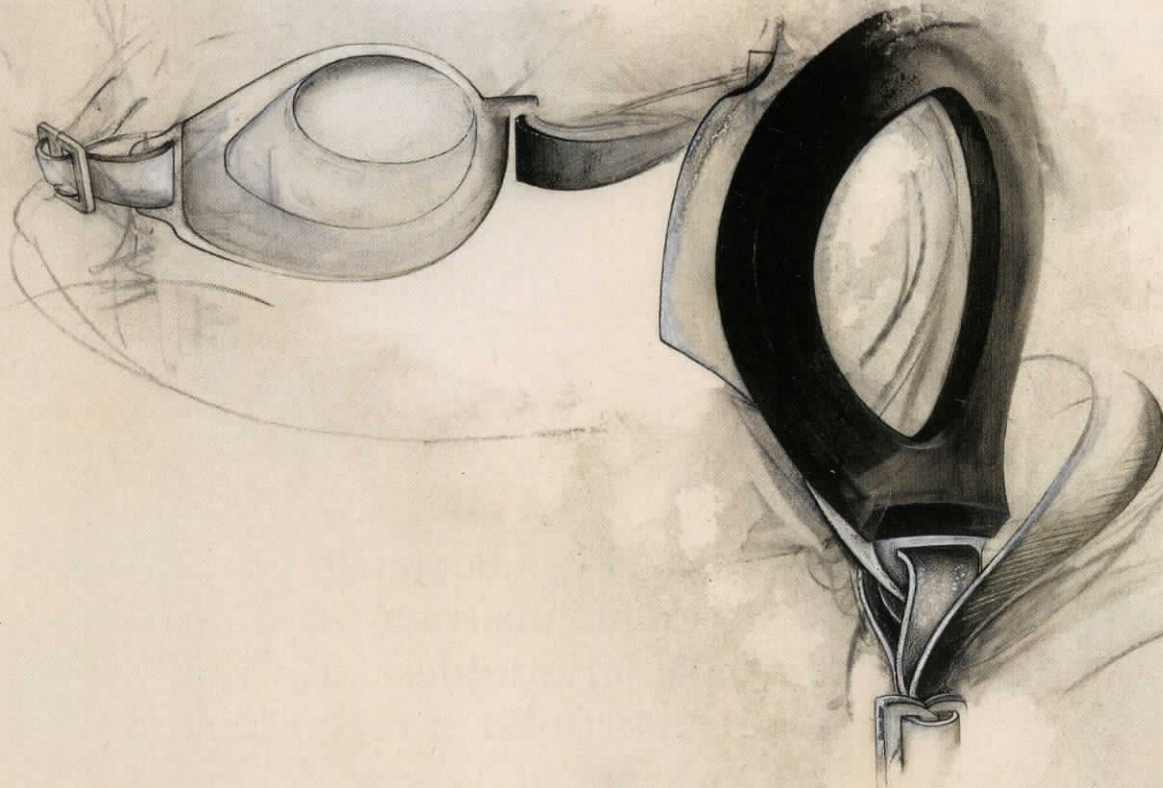
In the later 1970s, DeFeo often drew various objects she used in her daily life, including a camera tripod, swimming goggles, shoe trees and kneaded erasers. Though her choices were mundane, many of these items suggest themes of vision, which DeFeo underscored by imbuing them with subtle anthropomorphism. In two drawings of her swimming goggles, for example, the plastic lenses and their black rubber pads are exquisitely rendered in charcoal, graphite and touches of acrylic paint. But the goggles are also twisted into comic configurations of mutual surveil-

lance. DeFeo extracted a similar vitality from her tripod by focusing on the point where the three legs meet the camera mount. The subject of six drawings in the show, this essentially figurative form is animated by contrasts of sharp-edged integrity and blurry pentimenti.

AFTER A DECADE OF financial and professional struggle, DeFeo’s career stabilized on several fronts in the early 1980s. She joined the faculty of Mills College as a full-time professor, began showing her work at Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco, and secured a spacious studio in Oakland. The last of these circumstances prompted her to resume painting in oils on large canvases, some of which were displayed toward the end of the show. Though abstract, *Verdict No. 1* and *Verdict No. 2* (both 1982) were probably influenced by her smaller drawings of household objects, as they feature streamlined forms that partially dissolve into loosely brushed passages. DeFeo also embraced rich color in these oil paintings, relieving her dominant blacks with warm golds, peaches and flashes of red. A similar palette governs the striking *Geisha I* (1984/1987), which may have been prompted by an exhibition of Japanese helmets that DeFeo saw in 1985. As if describing a headdress in profile, a wide







J. DeFeo '77

band of dark umber and vermillion gently slopes from upper left to lower right, its underside releasing long, liquid tendrils of paint.

DeFeo's return to oil painting was short-lived, since she was diagnosed with lung cancer in April 1988. In the wake of surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, she was physically depleted but continued to draw and paint on a reduced scale for several more months, producing a compelling suite of small oil paintings on linen. Presented in the last gallery, these final works generate form through repeated short strokes of a brush or palette knife, reprising techniques first seen in her paintings from the late 1950s. And while none exceeds 16 by 20 inches, many of these canvases conjure natural phenomena of much larger dimensions. In *Blue One* (1989), for example, a quadrant of modulated grays seems to spread across a pale blue ground like a storm cloud. A crisp diagonal near the top edge of *White Water* (1989)

efficiently defines a towering cliff, over which daubs of white and gray cascade into darkness.

In another of these small oils, the achingly delicate *Last Valentine* (1989), DeFeo painted a faint heart shape on a buttery ground. Its tapered base is flecked with bruise colors while the upper lobes are drained of chroma and contour. If taken out of context, this image might seem partial and incomplete, reinforcing the longstanding myth of DeFeo as a thwarted artist, her potential sapped and sidetracked by her dogged pursuit of *The Rose*. No doubt she ended that project exhausted, disappointed by the painting's homelessness and somewhat out of step with an art world that had changed around her. But as this show demonstrates, rumors of her early demise were greatly exaggerated. DeFeo made significant art before *The Rose* and persisted well beyond that pivotal painting with a deep reservoir of creativity, a willingness to take chances and the ability to produce many more remarkable works of art. ○

Above, *Untitled*, from the "Water Goggles" series, 1977, synthetic polymer, charcoal, ink, grease pencil and graphite on paper, 15 by 20 inches. Private collection.

Opposite, *Blue One*, 1989, oil on linen, 16 by 12 inches. Jay DeFeo Trust, Berkeley.