

ARTFORUM

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By Lauren O'Neill-Butler
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Jay DeFeo

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This exhibition—which focused on Jay DeFeo's production following her three-year hiatus from artmaking after her completion of *The Rose*, 1958–66, her famous, one-ton painting of a burst of white light—gathered forty-nine pieces from the last fifteen years of the artist's life, several of which were absent from her recent traveling US retrospective. DeFeo, whose early work was animated by jazz and Beat subcultures and by the varied frequencies coursing through the San Francisco Renaissance, was also well known for her round-the-clock, sedulous-yet-playful ingenuity. She worked quickly until the end; many of the pieces here were produced in the last four years of her life, the most industrious period of her career. DeFeo made more than two hundred works in 1989 alone, the year she died of lung cancer in Oakland, California, at age sixty.

Titled after a song famously recorded by big-band leader Glenn Miller, the triptych *Tuxedo Junction*, 1965/1974, provides a bridge between DeFeo's *Rose* and post-*Rose* life. A somber evocation of her eviction from her San Francisco studio at 2330 Fillmore Street in 1965, the piece comprises three densely textured sections of *The Estocada*, an unfinished oil-on-paper work that DeFeo had hung on the walls of her studio hallway and then salvaged when she left. In 1974, she sprayed these fragments with a fixative—arresting the dirt, rust, and other bits of life that had accreted on their doughy surfaces over the previous nine years—and then adhered the papers to Masonite panels; suspended against white voids, these three viscous, impasto sections from the original painting seem to hover like ghosts. Installed nearby, *Untitled (White Spica)*, 1973, a smaller fragment of another work, further underscored DeFeo's archival impulse and was displayed in a salon-style hang of drawings, collages, and gelatin silver prints, some showing more richly textured objects such as barnacles, fake teeth, cauliflower.

For one of her final, feverish trips, DeFeo homed in on a small pink ceramic cup that the artist Ron Nagle gave to her for her sixtieth birthday. As she had with other items in the past, DeFeo rendered the object's odd shape using various media—drawing, painting, collage, and photocopies. Across these representations, the gift takes on a number of qualities, appearing alternately as hard-edged, anthropomorphic, and menacing. In the charcoal and acrylic work on paper *Seven Pillars of Wisdom No. 6*, 1989, DeFeo portrayed the cup as a depth that simultaneously absorbs and reflects light, a move that finds a surprising kinship with other light-based "voids"—namely Jo Baer's reductive canvases of the 1960s. Both DeFeo and Baer investigated light-dark contrasts and optical effects—and in subjective experiences of sensation at edges, contours, and boundaries.

DeFeo's little-known photocopies of paper tissues from 1989, also on view in this show, are fluctuating, amorphous transmissions that reflect and exalt the everyday, compressing fetish into formlessness without losing a sense of the three-dimensional. Importantly, they also point to the way in which, at the end of her life—with *The Rose* awkwardly concealed behind a wall at the San Francisco Art Institute—DeFeo had begun to embrace the ephemeral, the transient, and the fleeting, qualities antithetical to those characterizing her famous, monumental painting. I think of a line in "Orfeo" (1958), by the great San Francisco Renaissance poet Jack Spicer: "Hell is this: The lack of anything but the eternal to look at."

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Jay DeFeo, *Untitled*, 1987, photocopy, 11 x 8 1/2".