THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

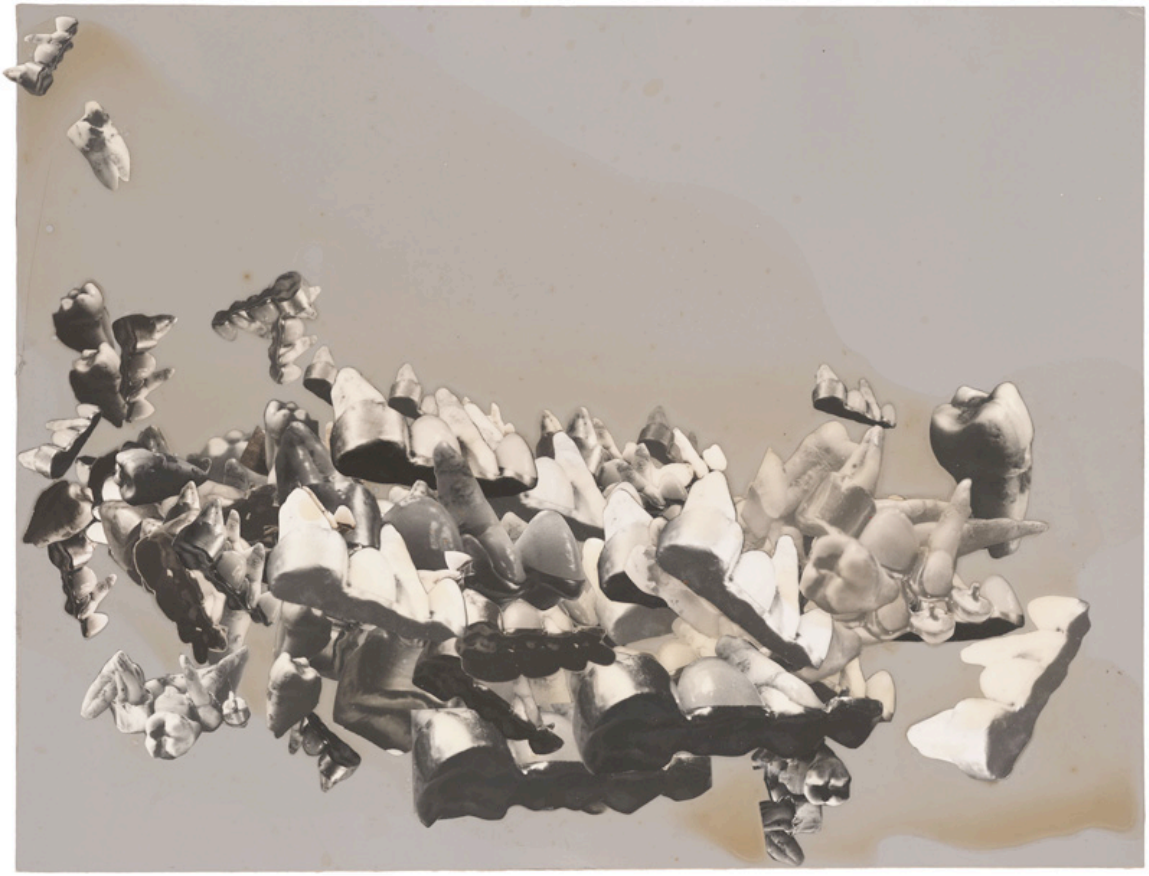
ARTSEEN

WEBEXCLUSIVE

Outrageous Fortune: Jay DeFeo and Surrealism

by Jessica Holmes

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH | MARCH 1, 2018 – APRIL 7, 2018



Jay DeFeo, *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)*, 1973. Photo collage with acrylic and glue on paperboard. 14 1/2 by 19 inches. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

In dream analysis, it's said that the familiar nightmare of one's teeth falling out represents anxiety over the possible loss of control. Fading beauty, or an inability to communicate might cause such a dream, but so too might a more catastrophic event: an illness or an eviction, perhaps. For artist Jay DeFeo (1929-1989) any of these occurrences could have provoked such a night terror,

and walking through *Outrageous Fortune: Jay DeFeo and Surrealism* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, one can't help but wonder if teeth dreams had plagued her. The exhibition takes as its premise the thrum of Surrealism that murmurs through DeFeo's body of work, and the reappearance of teeth is one of several tropes that surface.

Though more closely identified with the San Francisco Beat artists and poets of the late 1950s and early 1960s, DeFeo also looked to the Surrealists a generation older than she, and drew from artists such as Yves Tanguy, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray, whom she once called her "north star." She's always been best known for her iconic, one-ton, painting *The Rose* (1958-1966), whose creation nearly drove her mad. Causing DeFeo eviction from her home and a four-year hiatus from her artistic practice, the painting was eventually placed behind a false wall for decades, and only rediscovered years after her death from lung cancer. The stories that surround the work have cast a long shadow over DeFeo's career but this shrewd, present show treads lightly over the mythology of *The Rose* and instead makes an exceptional case for DeFeo's Surrealistic inclinations.

Though she is known primarily as a painter (a selection of canvases is on view), DeFeo worked in a wide array of media, including photography, to which a good portion of *Outrageous Fortune* is dedicated. She found and accentuated the living or marvelous qualities of inanimate objects to great effect, and a close reading of her photographs finds the head of a vacuum cleaner repeatedly becoming a face, and an old candlestick telephone becoming the curves of a woman's body. A lilting, S-shaped form manifests in a number works, as if it were a totem for DeFeo. It appears in one of the earliest in the show, *Untitled* (c. 1959-60), a strange photo-collage taped to a board. Along with one black-and-white photograph of man playing a guitar, and the scrap of another showing only a woman's lips, DeFeo affixed a scrap of manufactured, cardboard packaging with a version of this sinuous shape printed in red. The undulation appears again in *Untitled* (1972), a black-and-white photo DeFeo cut in such a way that the image is rendered nearly unrecognizable until studied up close. The sweeping contour turns out to be a tangle of dead tree limbs that appear to have collapsed over the precipitous drop of a cliff, with a car dangerously parked at its edge. In *Bride* (1986)—one of the exhibition's few oil paintings—the shape materializes as a luminescent form emerging from a murky, gray and black

background. Reminiscent of the graceful swoop of a human shoulder, it also recalls the arc of a smoking pipe, not unlike the one lionized in René Magritte's Surrealist masterpiece, *The Treachery of Images (This is Not a Pipe)* (1928-1929).

Jay DeFeo, *Bride*, 1986, Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 59 1/4 by 80 1/2 inches. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Whether the allusion was intentional or not, the Surrealist investments in chance and the unconscious mind appealed to DeFeo, for whom the body was both primary and fragile. In a painting she called *Trap* (1972), a moth accidentally flew into her wet paint while she worked, and it perished on the canvas. DeFeo was moved by the small accident and decided to leave the moth, incorporating it into the work. The composition of this exquisite canvas otherwise consists of only one simple form, which resembles the bottom half of an egg. The surface of the painting is so smooth, the paint so reverentially applied, it's little wonder that the moth was fooled into thinking there was nothing treacherous about its landing site.

And what about those teeth? *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)* (1973) is one of several works where dental imagery can be found, and it is the most unsettling. When it was made, DeFeo was suffering from periodontitis (a serious gum infection possibly caused by exposure to lead paint encrusted paintbrushes, which she used to hold between her teeth while working), which had necessitated a dental bridge for her mouth. Made of both real and false teeth, the object became one of fascination for DeFeo, and she photographed it repeatedly. *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)* is composed of dozens of images of the dental bridge, carefully scissored from the original photographs, and left to waft across paperboard coated in acrylic. “Like a rock slide settling into its angle of repose,” writes DeFeo scholar Dana Miller in her insightful catalogue essay, most of the cutouts ended up clustered in a mass towards the bottom of the page. A paradox on paper: hours of obsessive cutting resulting in meticulous snippets, then pitched to the fates to see where they might fall. The work is a surrealistic dream, or else a nightmare.