

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

## Outrageous Fortune: Jay DeFeo and Surrealism

534 West 26<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10001

March 1 – April 7, 2018

Opening Reception: Thursday, March 1, 6 – 8 PM



**NEW YORK, December 18, 2017** – Mitchell-Innes & Nash is pleased to announce *Outrageous Fortune: Jay DeFeo and Surrealism*, on view at our Chelsea gallery at 534 West 26<sup>th</sup> Street from March 1 through April 7, 2018. *Outrageous Fortune* features over seventy key works by DeFeo spanning three decades, from 1955 to 1986. It is the gallery's second solo exhibition of the artist's work and will run concurrently with a major survey of her work, *Jay DeFeo: The Ripple Effect*, at Le Consortium in Dijon, France.

Focusing on elements of chance, play and the marvelous in DeFeo's work, the exhibition brings together paintings, photographs, collages and works on paper to reveal how DeFeo's art often aligns with Surrealist attitudes. DeFeo was especially fascinated by the anthropomorphic potential of mechanical objects, presenting a photographed vacuum cleaner or tripod as an almost alive creature.

Like the Dadaists and Surrealists, DeFeo was intrigued by what she called an “enigmatic figurative reference.” In her 1955 painting *Landscape with Figure*, the title defies the traditional reading of a vase of daisies as a still life and asserts its “bodily” presence. This use of symbolic emblems for the human figure is a recurring theme in her work, playing off the idiosyncrasies of the everyday.

In some works, such as *White Knight*, an acrylic and charcoal work on paper from 1977, the body is subtly implied through visual synecdoche. Here, the reference to a helmet suggests not simply a face, but the figure lying beneath, while also evoking some strange hybrid being. An abstract, delicate 1981 graphite drawing from the *Minnie* series 1981, takes on a veiled presence, bringing to mind an elusive, possibly concealed face.

DeFeo's photo-based works are often more direct in their references to the body. For *Traveling Portrait (Chance Landscape)*, a photo collage from 1973, she gathered dozens of carefully cut photographs of her teeth on a paperboard backing and allowed them to move on a wet adhesive into a random composition. In the strangeness of its imagery and its use of chance operations, this work seems clearly linked to Dada and Surrealist strategies—including the pun of the title.

In other photo collages, DeFeo appropriated imagery from Bruce Conner's “Angel” series, specifically from an invitation to a 1975 exhibition of his work. In this series, DeFeo superimposed various cut photographs on Conner's “Angels”—figures resembling marble caryatids—and, in doing so, conflated machine and body.

Throughout her career DeFeo's interest in juxtaposing forms, intermixing traditional genres and experimenting with chance reveals a personal version of a Surrealist sensibility. Her chemigrams are perhaps the most salient example of this. Using chemicals to “paint” on photo-sensitive paper, she created a 1973 series titled *Salvador Dali's Birthday Party*, which she described as resembling “hand-painted dream photographs.”

The title of the exhibition, taken from Hamlet's famous soliloquy, captures DeFeo's openness to the vagaries of chance in her work. She once quoted the line “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” to describe accidents that befell her 1958 drawing *The Eyes*, now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Unintended cracks and tearing in *The Eyes* became, in DeFeo's words, “part of the piece, like the crack in Duchamp's *Glass*.”

“Jay DeFeo utilized chance and frequently considered herself lucky when accident intervened in her work,” said Dana Miller, who contributed an essay to a fully illustrated catalogue that accompanies the exhibition. Ms. Miller curated *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective* (2013) at the Whitney Museum of American Art. “The Surrealists viewed life as a succession of

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unpredictable shocks and provided a model for chancing the ridiculous. DeFeo took enormous chances throughout her career by changing media, shifting styles, and deviating beyond the usual bounds of scale, efficiency, practicality, or propriety.”

## About Jay DeFeo

Jay DeFeo (1929-1989) grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and attended the University of California, Berkeley, receiving her master of fine arts degree in 1951. With a fellowship from the university, she traveled to Europe and North Africa in 1951 and 1952, creating her first body of mature works there. Returning in 1953, DeFeo became a pivotal figure in San Francisco’s historic community of artists, poets and jazz musicians. She began incorporating the dualities of representation and abstraction, organic rhythms and geometric form, refinement and expressionism that became distinguishing traits of her art. DeFeo worked with unorthodox materials to explore the broadest definitions of sculpture, drawing, collage and painting.

In 1958 DeFeo began working on *The Rose*, a monumental work created over eight years, with so much oil paint that she called it “a marriage between painting and sculpture.” In 1959, she had a major solo exhibition at the Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco and her art was included in Dorothy Miller’s momentous exhibition *Sixteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles mounted her next solo exhibit in 1960.

After completing *The Rose*, DeFeo began investigating new materials and became deeply involved with photography and mixed media works, pursuing these in the 1970s. Often her subjects were favored domestic oddities, which she transformed into images that, in her words, “transcend the definition of the objects from which they are derived.”

In the 1980s, DeFeo returned to oil paint, while still continuing to mix and assemble materials in her work, creating large, glowing canvases and an expansive scope of works on paper. She accepted a teaching position at Mills College, where she became a tenured professor. DeFeo was diagnosed with cancer in the spring of 1988, but continued to work prolifically until just before her death on November 11, 1989, at the age of 60.

## About Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Founded by Lucy Mitchell-Innes and David Nash, who previously headed the worldwide Contemporary and Impressionist & Modern Art divisions of Sotheby’s, Mitchell-Innes & Nash places exemplary contemporary artists within a historical context, revealing a continuity of ideas and aesthetic virtuosity from the Modern era through the present day.

Mitchell-Innes & Nash’s renowned exhibition program, in both their Madison Avenue and Chelsea locations, fosters excellence within artistic practice, while forging an informed dialogue between emerging and established internationally recognized artists. From acclaimed surveys of 20th century masters, such as Jean Arp, Anthony Caro, Jay DeFeo, Willem de Kooning, Leon Kossoff, Kenneth Noland, Roy Lichtenstein, and Nicolas de Stael, to solo exhibitions of Sarah Braman, Keltie Ferris, Daniel Lefcourt, Pope.L, Martha Rosler, and Jessica Stockholder, Mitchell-Innes & Nash has proven expertise in both advancing the careers of emerging artists and maintaining the superior standard set by established artists.

Caption: Jay DeFeo, *Trap*, 1972, Acrylic and graphite with collage on Masonite, 25 by 22 ¾ inches 63.5 by 57.8 cm., Estate no. E1321

## Listings Information:

Mitchell-Innes & Nash is located at 534 West 26th Street in Chelsea and 1018 Madison Avenue on the Upper East Side.

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