

## Jay DeFeo

MARC SELWYN FINE ART

Despite having had a full-dress retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 2013, Jay DeFeo is still best known for a single work, *The Rose*, 1958–66, on which she labored in a monumental and duly mythologized process, regularly applying pigment and scraping it off, carving a ground that had long since thickened into a sculptural relief. Measuring approximately ten feet by eight feet and weighing nearly a ton, the behemoth was finally extracted from her apartment via forklift, an outside wall sliced open for the occasion. If this remained one's image of DeFeo, the smaller and self-evidently paper-thin works on view at Marc Selwyn Fine Art might have surprised. "The Texture of Color,"



a collection of twenty paintings on paper and three on linen (all from the 1980s), presented DeFeo's return to oil paint after more than a decade of using acrylics. In most of the works, sensitive evocations of landscape emerged from nonobjective smears. While oils did predominate, *Untitled (Broken black ceramic)*, 1986, an acrylic on paper stationed at the entry, suggested that DeFeo worked in both media simultaneously. But the colors DeFeo coaxed from the oils were a revelation, as in the roiling, lavalike reds and oranges of *Summer Landscape*, 1982.

The paintings on linen depicted—loosely and affectively—the Alabama Hills, conjuring the quintessentially “Western” California mountain range east of the Sierra Nevada. The epic and undeniably photogenic land formations have served as the backdrop for scores of films and television shows since the 1920s. In DeFeo's hands, the rounded contours flatten into planes delineating pictorial space as if in silhouette. As in the pieces on paper, geometry offsets amorphousness, and uninflected shapes puncture fields of loose brushwork: In *Untitled*, 1982, *Summer Landscape*, and others, monochromatic rigid shapes pinned down fluid aggregations of strokes. The Alabama Hills paintings also featured brilliant, descriptive applications of gesture. *Alabama Hills No. 8: Arctic Sunset* and *Alabama Hills No. 7: Jungle Sunset*, both 1986, registered the rock face in modulating grisaille—a palette familiar from DeFeo's career decades before—against fiery pockets of sky. A narrow band of yellow limning the peak of *Arctic Sunset* both established something like illusionistic recession (many of the works on view played with perspective and thwarted any sense of depth) and made evident how dark the rest of the picture remains.

Perhaps it is important to know that it was only in 1981 that DeFeo, born in 1929, got her first secure teaching job, at Mills College in

Oakland, California. This, in part, allowed her to travel to Japan and Africa, and it also paid for her oils. The resulting paintings evidence exploration, at close range, predicated on material intimacy. In 1988, DeFeo was diagnosed with cancer, and she died the following year. *Untitled*, 1988, the third painting on linen, was the latest in the show, made during a spell of productivity that also yielded, shortly thereafter, a series of lap-size charcoal drawings evocative of the geographies of her recent travels and the mountains she would never again scale. The painting proved a visual pendant to *Jungle Sunset*, its inverse, with flipped mulberry and gray sections. *Untitled*, like the others, is elemental, raked with light that is also form, against an inky blackness. DeFeo has been quoted as saying that “every painting has its own rules of color,” and here one sensed the vitality of her colors even at the limit of her own vision.

—Suzanne Hudson