

Object Lessons

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What can we learn from Jay DeFeo's drawings of everyday studio objects such as the series of camera tripods and compasses from the 1970s? Recent exhibitions have already taught us much about their extraordinary range of materials and techniques, comprising traditional drawing media such as charcoal, ink, pastel, and graphite, newer media such as photography and photocopy, and collages made of all of them. From studying various publications and the artworks themselves we are also beginning to better appreciate the sheer intensity with which DeFeo drew and re-drew, photographed and re-photographed her primary subjects in these years. Archival contact sheets of studio views in which various potential works-to-be are hung wall-to-wall are a testament to this relentless focus. Who knew something like a tripod or a compass could have so many permutations? Writers on the artist have also not failed to note the uncanniness of DeFeo's objects, their special fusion of the mechanical with the organic. This is an obvious inheritance from dada and surrealism, but one to which DeFeo has given a highly individualized spin¹.

The "tripod and its dress," as it is usually called, beg comparison with its Duchampian ancestors, the *Nude Descending a Staircase* and *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (Large Glass)*. At first it might seem strange in this context to bring up the former. After all, DeFeo made a painting called *Bride* and is known to have greatly admired *Large Glass*. Furthermore, it is the conceptual, linguistic, and institutional aspects of Duchamp's oeuvre, not so much his early painting, that takes precedence in the history of his postwar reception. In comparison, his lady stairwalker, still recognizable despite being rudely disjointed, seems to date from an earlier era, a more innocent time when painting could still plausibly offer a view, however off-kilter, of the real world.

The primacy of the bride over the nude in the reception of Duchamp is evident in almost every strain of avant-garde art that can be reasonably linked with DeFeo's drawings. Their mecanomorphic quality has roots in Duchamp's coffee-grinders, Man Ray's eggbeaters, and Picabia's lamps, the former of which figures prominently in the bottom pane of *Large Glass*. The almost person-like relationship of the viewer to DeFeo's objects is perhaps a more earnest, less commodified version of the relationship between viewer and thing in the Pop art of Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg. Again Duchamp had already pre-figured this development – that is, the disturbing presence of the everyday object injected into the sphere of art – in his various readymades. And of course the libidinal charge an object acquires through attempts to make it more body-like is no doubt something that post-surrealist art shares with Duchamp's various eroticized inventions, the rotoreliefs, the cast body parts, the mannequin seen through the peephole of *Etant donnés*.

¹ See, for instance, Elizabeth Sussman, *Jay DeFeo: Her Tripod and Its Dress* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2003); the essays in *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*, Dana Miller, ed. (New York: Whitney Museum, 2012); and Dana Miller, *Outrageous Fortune: Jay DeFeo and Surrealism* (New York: Mitchell-Innes and Nash, 2018).

However, one aspect of the drawings does not seem to share this artistic lineage. Something that has garnered hardly any attention but which impresses immediately upon seeing the works in person are what could be called their bleeding edges. By this I mean the way in which the tripod's legs and handle or the compasses arms are never fully articulated, never finally defined by the closing of a contour, or are otherwise blurred. Even when edges are clean-cut, as in the drawings on a dark ground, parts of the figure still trail off the sheet or are made illegible with heavy strokes. This effect is present no matter what the deformation, no matter what the cropping, and no matter how much of the sheet the object occupies. It is so consistent that one is tempted to see in it an overall principle.

Why this fascination for the ineffable fade? Unlike the mechanized portraits of Picabia or Man Ray, DeFeo appeared reluctant to let her drawing become fully mechanical. There is nothing of the sharp schematism with which the Dadaists evoked the crisp look of technical drawing. DeFeo was too devoted to the power of the declarative gesture to fully commit to such industrial anonymity in her own drawings. Her objects function otherwise: figures seem to become one with their support through a process of desaturation and a noticeable shift in gesture and texture. There is often a gradient in these works: a highly scumbled or impastoed area of emphasis becomes progressively more diffuse and more ghostly the further the eye moves from its initial starting point.

This also perhaps explains DeFeo's great attraction to the photocopy, something one would not normally expect from a such a material-centric artist. One could also achieve fade-out effects with photography, particularly through careful manipulation and printing of the negative. But that would have been a highly mediated and relatively slow process, whereas the Xerox machine had almost the same immediacy – but crucially not the same physicality – as manual drawing. Most importantly, the hazy field produced by the photocopier's scan resembles in its tones and fuzziness the shaded gradations of her drawings.

And this is finally where Duchamp's nude descends into the picture. For DeFeo seems to have been interested, as Duchamp was in his cubist period, in the moment when the figure first juts into consciousness from a ubiquitous yet hitherto unheralded ground. Whereas for surrealism and its followers, this moment was one of shock, convulsive, for artists like DeFeo, it was a pleasure distinct from the fear of death, the kind of experience one has when discovering something new and wondrous about the everyday world that one had never known before, an experience not unlike looking at one of DeFeo's transfigured objects.