

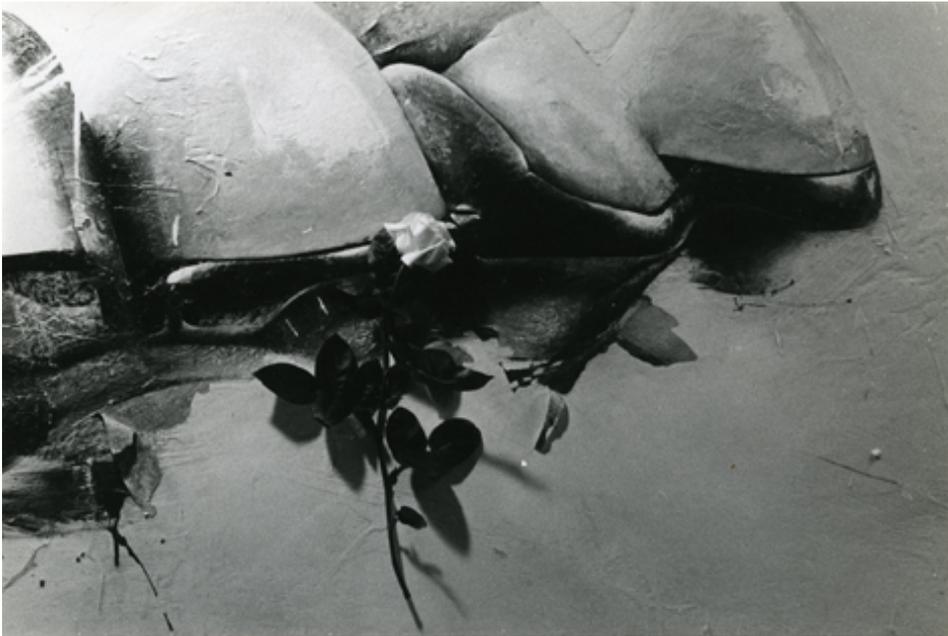
Frida Forsgren review with translation and image

KUNSTforum

September 14, 2015

A retrospective journey through 28 works: Jay DeFeo: A Rose Is a Flame Is a Sun Is a Star Is a Dove

By Frida Forsgren



Jay DeFeo, *Untitled*, c. 1972, gelatin silver print. © 2015 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Peder Lund.

The exhibition *Jay DeFeo: A Rose Is a Flame Is a Sun Is a Star Is a Dove*, at Peder Lund until October 31, is a rare opportunity to see the works of one of the 20th century's most important American artists in Norway. The 28 works offer a succinct journey from DeFeo's early career as a Beat artist in San Francisco, through the photography works of the 70s, to her role as a more established actor in the California art scene toward the end of her career. These 28 selected works are so stringently and carefully orchestrated that DeFeo's artistic project appears crystal clear. The leitmotif is the rose, a theme she worked with from the early 1950s and which appears as the subject in several of her main works.

Virgins in the Southland

Jay DeFeo (1929–1989) is still not very well known in Norway, despite her

growing status in the American and international art world. She does have a particularly large fan base in Southern Norway, where her monumental diptych *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* (1958) adorns the main auditorium at Kristiansand Cathedral School Gimle, thanks to the physician and art collector Reidar Wennesland, who acquired the paintings when they were new and later donated them to the school. In addition, at the University of Agder, students can see three of her early sketches from 1954, exhibited permanently in Vrimlehallen, thanks again to Reidar Wennesland. In the art world, Jay DeFeo was an underground phenomenon for a long time, a kind of “urban myth” among poets, painters, sculptors and thinkers in the alternative, exploratory Beat environment in San Francisco. She was inextricably linked to her main work, *The Rose*, which was created in the living room of her 2322 Fillmore Street studio. The creation of *The Rose* entailed a difficult artistic process, performed over eight years and culminating in a one-ton, 3.4 x 2.4-meter mastodon. When *The Rose* was finally removed from her studio with a forklift, its end came to be seen, in Beat mythology, as the end of the hectic and pulsating Beat era. The epic exhibition *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2012, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013) clearly illustrated that DeFeo’s artistic work is infinitely more than just *The Rose*, and it clarified for a wider audience both her anchoring in the canon of classic Western art and her exploration of the language of modern abstraction. It is this perspective that the exhibition at Peder Lund now brings to the Norwegian audience, while revealing the interweaving of the rose theme in the works shown.



Jay DeFeo, Untitled, 1973, gelatin silver print. © 2015 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Peder Lund.

Jay DeFeo at Peder Lund

All the works exhibited at Peder Lund are from The Jay DeFeo Trust, and they were personally selected with a confident curatorial grip by Peder Lund. The 28 selected works cover the period 1952–1988 and are arranged in chronological order in the small gallery, allowing us to clearly follow Jay DeFeo’s artistic career from one work to another. The gallery has chosen a clear gray color for the walls, a move that emphasizes the monochrome values in her works and at the same time provides a good contrast to the artist’s occasionally sharply graphic expression. The first work is taken from DeFeo’s earliest period. It is a rough pastel study in gray and black from the time she worked in Florence, after she spent several months on a road trip through Europe and North Africa.

Saturated with impressions from seeing cave paintings, cathedrals, museums and exhibitions, she began to paint in a rented apartment in Florence. The first works were similar to *Untitled* (1952): exploratory, rough, sludgy and abstract, in line with the American Abstract Expressionist style. *Untitled* (1957) has strong similarities with the slightly later symbolic paintings DeFeo worked on in the mid and late 1950s, such as *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* (1958), *The Veronica* (1957) or *The Annunciation* (1957-59), where vital, vibrant strokes, rather than the surface or color field, dominate the composition. The strokes, in ink, charcoal or oil, are faint or strong and reminiscent of organic shapes such as grass or straw. The work carries strong traces of the artist’s physical presence; we envision the hectic work process and how her body, through the brush and pencil, left physical traces on the sheet as an action painter would have done. The last work from the 1950s is *Study for The Rose* (1959), a collage put together with a photograph of *The Rose* encircled with drawn marks. We see [*The Rose*] in its early classical phase: the clear, crisp lines emanating from the center and the suggestive perspective that draws us into the middle. The little study has traces of lived life: it is wrinkled, full of marks and small tears, and represents a typical example of other similar photo collages of *The Rose* sent to friends as thank you cards and greetings. The collage is a striking example of the informal, unpretentious and playful expression of the Beats’ bohemian approach to art and life itself. Art was something you lived in your daily life and in the experiences you generously shared with friends.



Jay DeFeo, *Untitled*, 1973, gelatin silver print. © 2015 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Peder Lund.

The Rose Motif

From 1959, the exhibition chronology takes a major leap forward to 1972. In the years between 1966 and 1970, after *The Rose* was completed, DeFeo moved from San Francisco and distanced herself from the Beat environment, the parties and her ex-husband, and she completely stopped working as an artist. At the beginning of the 1970s, she resumed her work, mainly as a photographer at first. And it is from this point that we as viewers can begin to examine what has changed and what continues to remain constant in DeFeo's artistic work from the time before and after *The Rose*. The most tangible aspect of the photos exhibited at Peder Lund is the focus on the rose motif and the dance around a circular, spiraling core subject. *Untitled* (1972) shows a close-up of a pure white rose precisely depicted on a black background. This is startlingly detailed and reminds us of the clearly delineated white rose in *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* (1958). A more abstract reference to the rose motif can be found in the two

photographs from *Untitled* (1974-75) showing close-ups of cabbage leaves unfolding in a rose shape, where the parallels to *The Rose* are obvious and almost caricatured. Another striking photograph is *Untitled* (1973), depicting a close-up of heart surgery. One of my favorites is the small photograph *Untitled* (1974), which initially invokes associations to a ballroom or a richly adorned temple front, but on closer study reveals a close-up of the water level under a bridge. The dark foreground that gradually becomes more subdued toward the center of the composition, the gently rolling, organic and tactile forms in the dark water and the clear perspective lines show again the return to the search for a center or a core, which is the leitmotif of DeFeo's works.



Jay DeFeo, *Untitled*, 1987, acrylic, graphite, oil and oil pastel on paper. © 2015 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Peder Lund.

Back to the Beginning

The last works in the exhibition are from the 1980s, when Jay DeFeo returns to oil painting as her main medium. At this stage, we can note a return to marking as the structural element in the works. As in the early sketches from the 1950s, the pencil marks on the surface are central. This can especially be seen in the last work, *The Tissue of Falling Columns No. 3*, which impresses with its alternately quite fragile, sometimes stronger brushstrokes, and its thin layer of paint covering the forms as a veil. As in *Untitled* (1957), the strokes convey the seeking, expressive and human aspect to the composition, but in *The Tissue of*

Falling Columns No. 3 the pulsating action is replaced by a more poetic and hushed exploration. Knowing that this is a late work by DeFeo gives it an extra dimension. The abstract study *Untitled* (1986) also has a strong impact, as the only sketch with touches of color: in the middle of the turbulent, rolling wilderness of gray, blue and black brushstrokes, a strong red spot glows at us, like a hot, throbbing heart.



Jay DeFeo, Study for *The Rose*, 1959, graphite and gelatin silver print on paper. © 2015 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Peder Lund.

Abstraction of Daily Life

The exhibited chronology represents a precise summary of Jay DeFeo's main project, one that was articulated by the artist herself as seeking to create works that reach to the core or essence. When talking about *The Rose*, she said that she wanted to create something that had a center, a core, and this all-consuming idea recurs in every work, from the very early jewelry works to later sketches and monumental works, until her very last works. In particular this exhibition represents this thought in the photo works. Another key feature of DeFeo's

works is how she uses pencil lines to twist and turn known forms. She loves to abstract and condense forms until they somehow are left bare and strangely disclosed. During the 1970s and 1980s, she started to create studies of her tripod, swimming goggles and dental prosthesis, making them appear as unfamiliar, alien shapes, just as in the 1950s she started to abstract the picturesque colors and shapes of European cities, and played with the classic iconography of Western religious art history. In comparison to several of her male colleagues working within American abstract aesthetics, we can see that Jay DeFeo has a very classically trained expression. Right from the early sketches, inspired by the geometric shapes of Renaissance painters and traditional religious themes, to the last works, such as *The Tissue of Falling Columns No. 3*, with a title inspired by the writer John Muir, she finds inspiration in the concrete world, which is then atypically presented in an abstract formal language, be it through collage, photography, painting or sculpture.



Jay DeFeo, *Samurai No. 14*, 1987, oil and graphite on rag board. © 2015 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Peder Lund.

Beat at Peder Lund, a Sigh from the Heart of a Beat Researcher

My only objection to this exhibition is that it underplays the artist's power as the

herald of a message. The clean, cool, chronological presentation of these works is classy, beautiful and historically accurate, but when the artist's life and biography are absent, we also lose an important part of the artist's message. Jay DeFeo was a radical, struggling and unconventional woman. She was the first American woman who went "on the road" with a scholarship, who chose art over having a husband and children in an ultra-traditional postwar America. She did not seek attention for her works and declined a position with a gallery [in New York] early in her career, just to be able to be in San Francisco and work on *The Rose*, because she believed in the value of friendship and work. When staged in such an obviously commercial context, what she represented as a human being is essentially lost. The people around you, the process you were part of, was what made sense. So if you wanted, you could spend eight years of your life on a painting.

The exhibition will be open until October 31 at Peder Lund in Oslo.