

Oda Bhar review with translation and image

MORGENBLADET

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In the name of the Rose

The beat artist Jay DeFeo spent eight years and one ton of paint on her work *The Rose*. A small Oslo gallery is now searching for traces of the work.

By Oda Bhar



Jay DeFeo, Study for *The Rose*, 1959. © 2015 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of Peder Lund.

Heavy art: By 1965, when Jay DeFeo had to move out of her studio, *The Rose* had become so large that it had to be lifted out by forklift.

In the 1960s, **Jay DeFeo** (1929-1989) painted *The Rose* and it is as far away from a sentimental flower as it could be. It looks more like an exploding star than like something organic, with powerful lines radiating from the center. The relief is so deep that it gives the feeling of being made of plaster, when, in fact, it is constructed with about one ton of white and grey oil paint. DeFeo painted, waited until it dried, and cut it into patterns with a palette knife. She painted again and continued to do this for eight years.

From mania to limbo. Fifty years later, the gallery owner Peder Lund from Tjuvholmen started to look for traces of this work in the rest of her artistic works. He got a helping hand from Leah Levy, director of The Jay DeFeo Foundation in Berkeley, who worked closely with the artist during the last years of DeFeo's life. The exhibition includes paintings on paper, drawings and photography from the 1950s until DeFeo's death from cancer when she was sixty years old. This is the first time DeFeo's art is the subject of an exhibition in Norway, but she is represented in Reidar Wennesland's collection in Kristiansand – the largest collection of beat art outside the USA.

Some people have argued that *The Rose* was a compulsion for DeFeo. When she was forced to move out of her studio in 1965, the painting was so big that it had to be lifted out a dismantled window with the help of a forklift. The work was completed the next year at the Pasadena Art Museum, and then DeFeo entered a three-year phase where she didn't create any art. *The Rose* ended up in limbo, behind a protective wall at the San Francisco Art Institute, because there were no means to take proper care of it. It took 25 years before it was uncovered again, on the occasion of a large beat exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1995.

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Playfulness. At Peder Lund, *The Rose* is present in the form of an early photograph enlarged by the artist by mounting it on a larger sheet as her ambition for the work grew (*Study for The Rose*, 1959). We see more rose

photographs that differ from the conventional, with one flower cut and pasted on a sheet as a collage. For a non-romantic viewer, the artist had more interesting motives with the photograph of a plant that serves as a model for the painting *Cabbage Rose* (1975), in which the artist, using ironic humor, lets the leaves of a cabbage plant pose as a rose.

Some pictures remind of abstract expressionism, others have traits of surrealism, dada and formal experiments. Natural forms, such as mountains and grass, are played off man-made things like pillars under a wharf or a cottage in ruins. Another work demonstrates a playful ambiguity in the form of a dental prosthesis (the artist's own!) that is enlarged to look like mountains, or by something resembling a human figure that is actually a portrait of a camera tripod (*Tripod* series). A photograph of the work *The Eyes* impresses by being a large drawing in which the subject is represented by a pair of huge eyes with faint pupils. They look inward rather than outward, one with a shiny iris and the other with cracks in the iris, like a scar.

Personal search. *A Rose is a Flame is a Sun is a Star is a Dove* is an exquisite small exhibition providing a concentrated entry to the artist whose work was underestimated in her time. There is a spiritual dimension in DeFeo's art that may find more resonance today than in the period in which it was completed that was dominated by pop art, minimalism and conceptual art.

DeFeo's search for personal truth is evident in her main work *The Rose*, but the hypothesis that her entire artistic oeuvre flows through *The Rose* is not persuasive. On the contrary, Jay DeFeo appears a versatile and experimental artist who worked in different media and expressions throughout her forty years of art-making. Her development continued far beyond *The Rose*, although she never again dedicated herself to a single work with a similar creative force over such a long period of time.

Jay DeFeo

A Rose Is a Flame Is a Sun Is a Star Is a Dove

Peder Lund, Oslo

September 5 – October 31