

WHITNEY

Press Release

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street
New York, NY 10021
whitney.org/press

Contacts: Stephen Soba, Graham Newhall
Tel. (212) 570-3633
pressoffice@whitney.org

THE WHITNEY TO PRESENT *JAY DEFEO: A RETROSPECTIVE*



DeFeo working on what was then titled *Deathrose*, 1960.
Photograph by Burt Glinn. © Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos

NEW YORK, December 12, 2012—Jay DeFeo spent nearly eight years realizing her masterpiece, *The Rose* (1958-66), an approximately 2,000-pound painting that is now recognized

as one of the icons of the Whitney Museum's collection. This winter, the Whitney will place *The Rose* within the context of more than four decades of DeFeo's work in the most comprehensive look at the artist to date.

Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective, which opens on February 28, 2013, features nearly 150 of DeFeo's works, many of which will be exhibited for the first time. The show traces motifs and themes the artist examined throughout her career in drawings, photographs, collages, jewelry, and the monumental paintings for which she is best known. The exhibition is organized by Dana Miller, curator of the permanent collection at the Whitney, and will be on view in the fourth-floor Emily Fisher Landau Galleries through June 2, 2013.

"DeFeo remains an artist whose full career has not yet received the careful consideration that it deserves," Miller states. "In presenting her entire career, this retrospective demonstrates the captivating sweep of DeFeo's heterogeneous work and illuminates her groundbreaking experimentation and extraordinary vision."

The retrospective comes home to the Whitney after receiving critical acclaim and attracting large audiences at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Kenneth Baker wrote in his review of the exhibition, "Before and since her death at 60 in 1989, DeFeo's reputation has hinged on one colossal work: 'The Rose'... This belated career survey corrects that overemphasis but, more important, it introduces DeFeo to a broad public as an artist of wide and diverse accomplishment." The substantially larger presentation at the Whitney will also feature an expanded selection of DeFeo's drawings and photographs from the 1970s.

Arranged chronologically, the works range both in size, from mere ounces to nearly one ton, and in subject, from the intensely personal to the cosmic. Miller's layout of the exhibition at the Whitney, which places *The Rose* at the center of the exhibition space, was inspired by a diagram DeFeo made of the relationships between her works. In that diagram *The Rose* is presented as a spiral shape at the center, absorbing much of what came before it and stimulating the subsequent work. At the Whitney, DeFeo's masterpiece will be installed in a room by itself and in lighting conditions that replicate those of her studio. While DeFeo worked on the painting, it was lit almost exclusively by the raking light that streamed in from the narrow bay windows on either

side of the work. DeFeo considered this side lighting to be an essential ingredient in the making and viewing of *The Rose*.

About the Artist

Jay DeFeo claimed she knew she wanted to become an artist by the time she was “old enough to scribble.” Born in 1929 in New Hampshire, she was raised in San Jose, California, and spent most of her adult life in the San Francisco Bay Area. She studied art at the University of California, Berkeley, staying an extra year to receive her masters of fine art degree in 1951. During her final year, the University awarded her a fellowship, which she used to travel through Europe and North Africa. It was during this time that DeFeo began creating her first mature works, several of which are included in the show.

Returning to Berkeley in 1953, DeFeo made small-scale sculptures and pieces of jewelry, some of which she was able to sell to support herself. For the first time, more than thirty examples of these delicate works made from wire, beads, and metal will be on display. DeFeo gravitated toward a community of artists, poets, and musicians now known as the Beats and developed close friendships with figures such as Bruce Conner, Wallace Berman, and Michael McClure. She married fellow artist Wally Hedrick in 1954 and became the de facto secretary of the legendary Six Gallery that Hedrick opened with five others. The couple was at the center of the creative avant garde in San Francisco at the time and was in attendance when Allen Ginsberg gave the first public reading of his epic poem *Howl* at the Six Gallery.

In the late fifties, DeFeo garnered national attention and was among the more prominent female artists of her generation. The esteemed curator Walter Hopps championed her work, including her in several shows at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. In 1959, New York-based curator Dorothy Miller included five of DeFeo’s works alongside those of Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella in the Museum of Modern Art’s star-making *Sixteen Americans* exhibition. Miller lobbied unsuccessfully to include *Deathrose*, an early version of the painting that would eventually be titled *The Rose*, but DeFeo did not want to part with the unfinished work.

Between 1958 and 1966, DeFeo worked almost exclusively on *The Rose*, repeatedly layering on and chiseling away paint with trowels and palette knives; she sometimes would scrape the work

back down to the bare canvas, only to begin again from scratch. The massive painting was already celebrated within art circles when workers arrived in 1965 to extract the approximately eleven- by-eight-foot piece from DeFeo's studio. Unable to fit the canvas down the narrow stairs, the workers cut out part of the window and wall and lowered it using a forklift. Bruce Conner memorably captured the event in his film *The White Rose* (1967). It was another three years before *The Rose* was unveiled at the Pasadena Museum of Art.

During this time, DeFeo took a three-year hiatus from art-making and largely faded from the public eye. Among the first major works she created when she began working in earnest again are the ghostly *After Image* (1970) and *Crescent Bridge I* and *Crescent Bridge II* (both 1970-72), the latter two depictions of her dental bridge that was rendered necessary by gum disease.

Always eager to work with new media, DeFeo began to explore photography. A 1973 National Endowment for the Arts grant allowed her to buy a medium-format camera and install a darkroom in her home. She incorporated her photographs into highly inventive collages. These works, much like her paintings and drawings, were the result of an iterative process of building an image, breaking it down, and then reworking it again. This open-ended and labor intensive process, which the artist described as a "cliff-hanging experience," allowed for highly expressionistic forms and an astonishing range of surfaces. Yet DeFeo's intuitive and expansive method of working was tempered by her sense of compositional order and an often restrained grisaille palette. It is this state of balance, between carefully composed images and lush surfaces, expressive forms and subtle coloring, which intensifies her unique and utterly compelling body of work. The Whitney presentation will include the largest selection of DeFeo's photographic work seen publicly to date.

DeFeo joined the art faculty of Mills College in Oakland in 1981 (she was awarded tenure there in 1986). The appointment brought her financial stability, and she began producing large-scale paintings in oil for the first time since the mid-60s. She traveled to Africa and Asia, incorporating influences from her voyages into her visual language. She continued to paint until her 1989 death, at the age of 60, from lung cancer.

The Rose and the Whitney

After the 1969 exhibitions of *The Rose* in Pasadena and at the San Francisco Museum of Art, the painting was installed in a newly built conference room at the San Francisco Art Institute. It remained there, enjoyed by students and others at the school, until 1974 when concerns were raised about the stability of its surface. Conservators placed a protective coating over the work in what was meant to be a temporary measure. The subsequent stages of conservation never took place and in 1979, the Institute constructed a temporary wall in front of it, effectively entombing the mammoth work.

It wasn't until 1995 that the Whitney Museum and the Jay DeFeo Trust embarked upon a project to recover and conserve *The Rose*. Led by the Whitney's director at the time, David Ross, and then curator, Lisa Phillips, the Museum devoted extensive resources to bringing the work back to exhibitable condition. *The Rose* was displayed for the first time in 26 years in the 1995 show *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*. The work was acquired at that time by the Whitney with support from the Judith Rothschild Foundation. It has been seen twice more at the Whitney, in *The American Century* in 2000 and as the centerpiece of the intimate 2003 show *Beside the Rose: Selected Works by Jay DeFeo*, curated by Dana Miller.

The Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a 320-page richly illustrated catalogue, featuring an overarching essay by Miller addressing DeFeo's full career, as well as a biographical chronology. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, associate director of conservation and research at the Whitney; Corey Keller, curator at SFMOMA; and writers Michael Duncan and Greil Marcus also contributed essays. It is the most comprehensive monograph on DeFeo to date and presents new scholarship and an extensive number of images never published before. *Publisher's Weekly* stated in its review of the catalogue: "The book is a landmark and celebrates a reputational coming-of-age for an important artist."

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About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the world's leading museum of twentieth-century and contemporary art of the United States. Focusing particularly on works by living artists, the Whitney is celebrated for presenting important exhibitions and for its renowned collection, which comprises over 19,000 works by more than 2,900 artists. With a history of exhibiting the most promising and influential artists and provoking intense debate, the Whitney Biennial, the Museum's signature exhibition, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in the United States. In addition to its landmark exhibitions, the Museum is known internationally for events and educational programs of exceptional significance and as a center for research, scholarship, and conservation.

Founded by sculptor and arts patron Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1930, the Whitney was first housed on West 8th Street in Greenwich Village. The Museum relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and, in 1966, inaugurated its present home, designed by Marcel Breuer, at 945 Madison Avenue on the Upper East Side. While its vibrant program of exhibitions and events continues uptown, the Whitney is moving forward with a new building project, designed by Renzo Piano, in downtown Manhattan. Located at the corner of Gansevoort and Washington Streets in the Meatpacking District, at the southern entrance to the High Line, the new building, which has generated immense momentum and support, will enable the Whitney to vastly increase the size and scope of its exhibition and programming space. Ground was broken on the new building in May 2011, and it is projected to open to the public in 2015.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

...as apple pie

Wade Guyton OS

Richard Artschwager!

Trisha Baga: Plymouth Rock 2

Sinister Pop

Through early 2013

Through January 13, 2013

Through February 3, 2013

Through January 13, 2013

Through March 31, 2013

Dark and Deadpan: Pop in TV and the Movies
Blues for Smoke
Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective

Through March 31, 2013
February 7-April 28, 2013
February 28-June 2, 2013

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. General admission: \$18. Full-time students and visitors ages 19–25 and 62 & over: \$14. Visitors 18 & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6–9 p.m. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.