

GAGOSIAN



Jay DeFeo's artwork defied labels, which is why it's still relevant today

Tony Bravo



*The textures in Jay DeFeo's "Trap" (1972) draw in viewers. The painting includes a real moth.
Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artists Rights Society*

With her refusal to be confined to one medium, Jay DeFeo was in many ways more akin to today's conceptual artists, who reject categorizing themselves, rather than her midcentury contemporaries, says Kelly Huang, the co-director of Gagosian gallery in San Francisco. Working across painting, photography, collage and even jewelry, there was a distinct visual language she brought to each art form, including experimenting with scale, exploring the ambiguity of shape and most of all, redefining how texture could be used. Throughout her career, DeFeo, who died in 1989, moved beyond many of the labels imposed upon her.

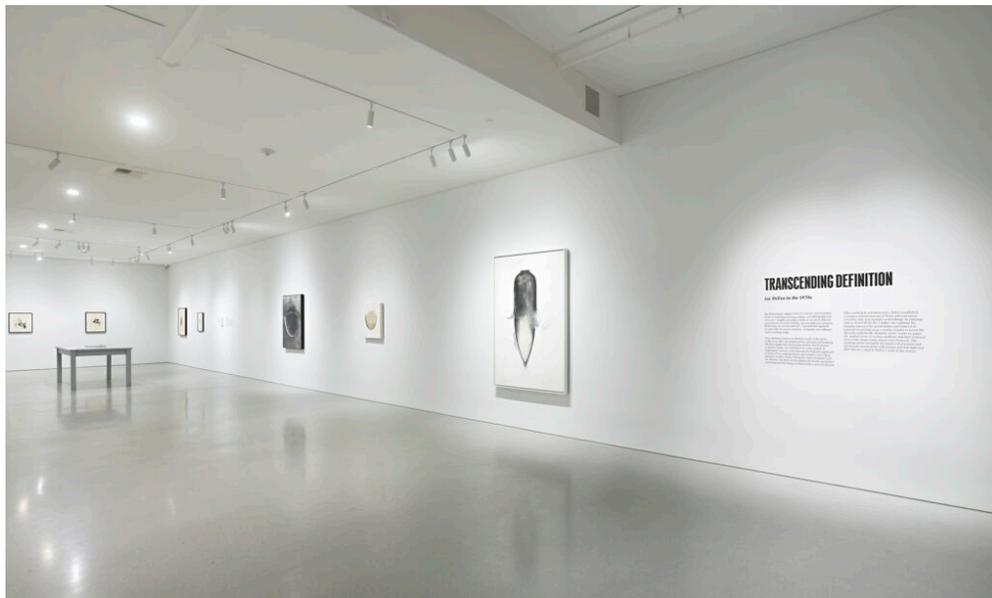
The title of the gallery's current show organized with the Jay DeFeo Foundation, "Transcending Definition: Jay DeFeo in the 1970s," reflects the artist's refusal to be constrained.

"We came across a quote from a 1978 letter to Henry Hopkins, who was the director of SFMOMA," says Huang. "She says, 'Even the more literal drawings of the recent work hopefully transcend the definition of the objects from which they're derived.' This applied to

Jay's approach to studying and working with these quotidian objects: jewelry, tripods, shoe trees, what she saw as these, as she says in that letter, 'isolated beings suspended in space and time.' ”

For example, the abstraction of everyday objects takes paintings in the “Shoetree” and “Tripod” series beyond just representing the items themselves with different angles and vantage points removing their context, transforming them into lines and surfaces that don't always easily reveal the subject. That recasting of the ordinary and reinterpretation of familiar ways of seeing forms is apparent in the more than 20 pieces on display in the show.

Frequently, this leads to deeply meditative and tranquil works like the 1972 painting “White Shadow,” showing a dark bowl-like object against a similar background, and “Trap,” also from 1972, showing a similar concept in a beige-and-white color scheme. Both paintings draw the viewer in with their attention to texture, which includes an actual moth in the paint on “Trap.”



“Transcending Definition: Jay DeFeo in the 1970s” showcases the artist’s recasting of the ordinary and a reinterpretation of familiar ways of seeing forms. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artists Rights Society

“In the ’70s, I sometimes felt that Jay was trying to make acrylic behave like oil paint,” says Leah Levy, the executive director of Berkeley’s Jay DeFeo Foundation. “She was after that texture and always inventing, adding other materials.”

DeFeo grew up around the Bay Area and settled in San Francisco during the early 1950s. With her husband, artist Wally Hedrick, she became a part of the thriving Beat scene and was included in the important 1959 Museum of Modern Art exhibition “Sixteen Americans” with the likes of Jasper Johns and Louise Nevelson that became one of the most controversial and forward-looking shows of the era, helping to define the midcentury American canon. Works by DeFeo in oil, charcoal and graphite were included, showing her early range.

“The Rose,” DeFeo’s epic masterpiece, consumed her from 1958 to 1966. The 10½-foot tall, one-ton painting of a starburst-like formation is so thickly layered with paint in some places it evokes sculptural techniques and shows her experiments with texture at their pinnacle. “The Rose,” which is now in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, remains DeFeo’s most well-known work. But in the decade after its completion, her

practice continued to evolve, both building on ideas formed with “The Rose” and resetting creatively after the massive undertaking.



*Jay DeFeo hikes Mount Tamalpais in 1972. Her work changed in the 1970s after her move from San Francisco to Marin County.
Photo: John Bogdanoff, 1972*

“Jay talked about her work of the ’70s really relating to ‘The Rose’ in many ways in the kind of imagery, the kind of texture,” Levy says. “On the other hand, her materials changed and she went from doing overtly sculptural work through oil paint and other materials to doing something that achieved a different kind of texture and form and presence. She’s experimenting and at the same time, her visual vocabulary, the shapes that called to her, are very similar.”

Huang views “The Rose” as a culmination of DeFeo’s ’50s and ’60s explorations of spirituality and myth and says that in the ’70s her work continued to explore those themes, “but through these objects, rather than through pure abstraction.” Paintings like “Lotus Eater No. 1” from 1974 are especially emblematic of that thread with its abstracted vessel shape recalling both religious talismans and forms of the sacred feminine.



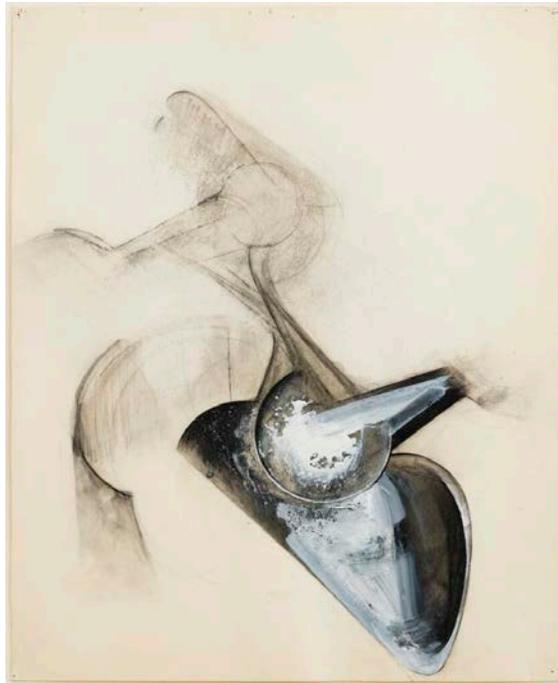
“Figure V” from the “Tripod” series (1976) is an example of taking abstraction to another level. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artists Rights Society

“The work from the ’70s encapsulates such a broad spectrum of ideas that endured throughout Jay’s years of artistic practice,” Huang says. “It was a time of varied output, so the exhibition is at once very specific yet also gives one a broad view of who Jay was as an artist.”

The 1970s were a time of great disruption and, in some cases, isolation for the artist. DeFeo moved to Marin County early in the decade after her divorce from Hedrick, uprooting her from her familiar community. The move took her from the vibrant San Francisco scene to the quiet solitude of Larkspur, and the shift was reflected in her art.

“It changed profoundly,” Levy says. “There was a physical distance, a relationship change, a financial insecurity that went beyond what she already had. All of these things I think made a big difference” in her art.

In her work on “The Rose,” Huang says much of DeFeo’s practice was focused on the building up of surfaces. In the ’70s, many of DeFeo’s painted and multiple medium works “are marked by the stripping down of material,” Huang says. “There’s erasing, peeling, tearing.”



Lines and surfaces don't always easily reveal the subject in Untitled and other works in the "Shoetree" series (1977). Photo: Robert Divers Herrick, Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artists Rights Society

In that 1978 letter to Hopkins, DeFeo says, "I began to see 'The Rose' as the storehouse for all the symbols, shapes and imagery that went into it, releasing all the ideas that have come since."

DeFeo's work of the '70s strips down many of those things to their most essential elements.

During the curation process, Huang came to appreciate how DeFeo's '70s output "feels relevant to our current social moment in a very poetic way. Jay was able to find the beauty in the quotidian objects around her when she was working alone in Larkspur. These objects, as she put it, transcended their definition and became larger than life. It wasn't that we curated it for the pandemic moment, but that relationship is there because we are living this moment right now. It's really a soft connection there, but I think it's a powerful one."