

EBX

EAST BAY EXPRESS

Jay DeFeo

A SHINING STAR
OF THE ART WORLD
REMEMBERED P8

EAST BAY'S INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER SINCE 1978 · DECEMBER 8-14, 2021 · EASTBAYEXPRESS.COM

SARAH CAHILL P3 WESTSIDE STORY REDUX P10 WAHPEPAH'S KITCHEN P14

'Rip Tails'

Jordan Stein's latest book delves into the invisible impacts of Jay DeFeo's art **BY LOU FANCHER**

COUCHED ON THE surreal sofa of Bitcoin—digital currency that isn't actually cash—and a contemporary art scene that introduced NFTs—non-fungible tokens that render artwork, videos and music into unique, “one-of-a-kind” bits of digital data that are not 2D, 3D or in any way tangible—the work of artist Jay DeFeo (1929–89) seems infinitely paradoxical, even fantastical. The Bay Area artist once labored almost exclusively for eight years on *The Rose*, an epic, 2,000-pound painting so massive its extraction required a Bekins Moving Company team to saw an opening in the bay window of the artist's San Francisco apartment in which it was created.

A day later and on the cusp of being evicted, DeFeo ripped from the wall her *Estocada*, a large-scale painting on paper that was stapled directly to a hallway wall in her tiny home studio. The artwork came off in ragged-edged chunks which she saved and years later repurposed and reinvigorated through photography, photocopy, collage and relief.

Three of the *Estocada* shards are now housed as a triptych held in the collection of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco; other bits and pieces reside in the custody of the artist's foundation in Berkeley. *The Rose* followed a no-less-spectacular odyssey of its own. Shipped to the Pasadena Art Museum, the enormous 11-foot-tall, grayscale painting made its debut before returning to make a well-received Bay Area appearance at the San Francisco Museum of Art—later the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Eventually hung on a wall of the McMillan Conference Room in the San Francisco Art Institute, a particle-

board wall was erected in 1979 to provide additional exhibition space for SFAI students' work. DeFeo's opus-worthy painting lay almost entirely hidden behind the wall, destined to be forgotten. The Whitney Museum financed a restoration in 1995, years after DeFeo, at the age of 60, succumbed to cancer in 1989. The Rose's astonishing journey from its origins at 322 Fillmore Street to the Pasadena Art Museum is forever immortalized in fellow artist Bruce Conner's 1967 film, *The White Rose*.

The trauma of feverishly immersing herself in single works of art such as *The Rose* took a serious toll on DeFeo. Her artwork and artistic pursuits even to this day defy categorization as Abstract Art or Abstract Expressionism—nor is her work boxed in by the materials and multiple mediums she used that include paint, found and created paper, photos, photograms, photocopies, collage, glues and resins, drawing and painting tools, and more. Her art spun through wildly eclectic subject matter sparked by impossible-to-predict origins such as her abandoned dental bridge, bull fighting, clustered lines resembling human hair, the female form and Italian architecture, to name a few.

DeFeo was born in Hanover, N. H., and grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. She attended UC Berkeley, receiving a bachelor's in 1950 and an M.A. in 1951. After graduation, she was awarded a fellowship and traveled from October 1951 to January 1953 in Europe and North Africa, including a pivotal six-month period in Florence. Following “completion” of *The Rose*—her body of work seems forever restless and without finality—she retreated to Marin County. After collapsing her art practice for three years to recover, she slowly resumed creating art across a by-then-typical interdisciplinary landscape.

In 1981, DeFeo moved to Oakland and began teaching at Mills College,



SHE GAVE HER ALL The trauma of feverishly immersing herself in single works of art, such as *The Rose*, took a serious toll on DeFeo.

where within five years she received tenure. Working prolifically in tandem with art instruction, she was forced to leave her Oakland studio in October 1989 due to damage caused by the Loma Prieta earthquake. She died in November, just a few short weeks later. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others, and has been exhibited at the New York Museum of Modern Art, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the San José Museum of Art, the Phoenix Art Museum, San Francisco's Dilexi Gallery, the Le Consortium in Dijon, France, and other locations.

Remarkably, DeFeo's extraordinary art-making practices and philosophies were recently chronicled in a new book, curator and writer Jordan Stein's *Rip Tales: Jay DeFeo's Estocada and Other Pieces* (Sobercove Press, 2021). Published by the small, Chicago-based art-book press, Stein's slim, provocative book presents DeFeo in a format almost as revelatory as the artist's body of work. DeFeo's story is interwoven with narratives of other artists, most often people working at the

same time or in ways similar to DeFeo, or artists with whom Stein has worked. Short essays, interviews and images open windows into the history and culture of 60 years of Bay Area art without dictating exactly what a reader will take away from the experience of “getting to know” about DeFeo and the art and artists of her time.

In an interview, Stein admits being far more comfortable identifying as a curator than as a writer. “I've never sat down to write a book,” he tells me. “Even the verb, ‘to write’—well, I'll say that some of this book I spoke, some I collaged. I don't know the word to factor for it. It started when I was telling my publisher, Julia Klein, the story of Jay DeFeo. She looked at me and said, ‘Do you want to make a book about it?’ I said, ‘No,’ because I work as a curator: I write essays, short-form text about specific bodies of work. I have friends who are writers and they sit in a room, miserable, staring at screens for hours. I didn't want to live without interacting with actual art for the length of time it might take to write a book.”

But something shifted in his mind, because Stein researched and read



Photo courtesy of The Conner Family Trust

everything he could lay his hands on about DeFeo by the summer of 2019. At that time, he had only a glimmer of a feeling that hers would be the backbone of a larger story that introduced alternative voices. *Rip Tales* eventually coalesced to also include artists Zarouhie Abdalian, April Dawn Alison, Ruth Asawa, Lutz Bacher, Bruce Conner, Dewey Crumpler, Trisha Donnelly and Vincent Fecteau.

At one time during the writing process, Stein wrote a chapter about the relevance of DeFeo's complex, category-defying work. During the current climate in which Covid, politics, zealous capitalism, social and civil strife and other tensions have America facing a racial reckoning and wrestling with the country's history and the future definition of Democracy, he sought to establish her relevancy. "I took it out," Stein says. "It felt too on-the-nose. I don't think Jay could tell you why she was doing what she was doing, and I liked that. Nor did I want to tell the reader why I was writing this book. The arts, since maybe the mid-'70s, has become so closely tied to the market and aggression, to late-stage capitalism, that artists aren't

feeling they can just make a thing of art and have that provide enough meaning. It's a beautiful and romantic idea that I saw in Jay's story. It might sound goofy. Someone might ask, 'Isn't all art a romantic idea?' Yes, but it's increasingly difficult to take big risks."

The story of *Estocada* is essentially a tale about the destruction of a work of art. Stein suggests it demonstrates the way "lost" art bloomed into new works made by DeFeo with unexpected energy and vigor. "Estocada comes back as *Tuxedo Junction*, a series of collages; and then in unfinished photographs, in pieces of stuff that resemble the moon or fragmentary sculptural gestures," he says.

Stein moved to California from the East Coast in 2003 to attend SFAI, where he earned an M.A. in 2005. "I learned about art by living in the Bay Area, and maybe I thought if the *Estocada* came to life that there would be light I could shed on DeFeo, on the ethos, on her way of working and on other stories I was told that felt similar," he says. "These other artists weren't DeFeo acolytes, and so I knew I could not come up with a grand theory. I could not find a fancy name for this way of working, but I wanted

to tap into the spirit of it. Art was a part of their daily experience, and it remains mysterious on some levels. I asked myself then and ask now, 'This Bay Area spirit, what is it?'"

Stein established and operates Cushion Works, an exhibition and program space in San Francisco's Mission District, and is a co-founder of the interdisciplinary collective Will Brown. Among the most intriguing artists he has worked with, and included in the book, is the late Lutz Bacher, who died in 2019. "Lutz was one of the more magical people I've ever known," Stein says. "For the projects we did together, I'd write the text. I'd send it to her and she'd say, 'Let's just instead send out a photograph of your dog and let people know where they can see the work.' I wanted, in the book, to honor her, to be plainspoken in talking about her. There needs to be room for other people to talk about why her work is important during the second half of the last century and into this one. I think she'll be seen as the Marcel Duchamp of that time period someday."

The chapter on Lutz, in *Rip Tales*, describes the time she appeared at architect Philip Johnson and David Whitney's iconic Glass House in New Canaan, Conn., with her submission to be included in Stein's first high-profile curation of a sculptural exhibition. A rotating roster of sculptures made by contemporary artists was to rest on a Miles van Der Rohe glass coffee table in the home, in which every piece of artwork and furniture was meticulously mapped.

Lutz appeared, jumping out of a cab and popping open her purse to pull out a clear plastic binder sleeve in which there was a slim strip of paper from a fortune cookie. In blue ink, it read, "Develop an appreciation for the present moment." That was it; her sculptural contribution.

Another time when their paths crossed, she had taken Donald Trump's signature used on checks, executive orders, loan applications, tax returns and in other ways, and stretched the signatures into an elongated, photocopied banner. Printed lengthwise and exhibited at waist height like a jagged, erratic belt rimming the gallery, the signature resembled an EKG—"the whole place was a heart

attack," Stein writes—or a seismograph of an earthquake; shark's teeth; a spiked, compressed mountain range; the scratchings of a person imprisoned in solitary confinement.

Stein says, "Lutz was uncomfortable with definitions. She understood content is context. She made grand, sweeping gestures not across a canvas but across an entire exhibition space."

As a curator, he finds the most exciting art is found not in art magazines or museums, but in "the dusty dark corners that are not a movement or school of thought." He finds it in artists who are completely devoted to what they do and believes his role as a curator is to be nearly invisible. "I used to think a curator had to have a thesis," he says. "I don't believe that anymore. I've tried tying an artist's work up in a bow, as if it's some kind of an equation. The best shows I see are when curators have made decisions, but there are no display notes or signals embedded in the walls that tell you how to think about the work."

Writing *Rip Tales* has Stein believing art is an experience—a dynamic thing—and inherently political. "An artist making something that's not connected to a capitalistic, inflated system? It's political. Jay working on one piece for years? That's blazingly political," he says. "It's astonishing to say, 'as an artist I'm not able to do a show of work'—she turned down a major show in New York while working on *The Rose*—'because I'm working on this one thing.' And then she worked for years on the detritus of *Estocada*, a destroyed piece. I'm good with that. If art is talking about things we don't know how to talk about, fumbling around in the dark, trying to figure out things we don't know about, well, that's like life.

"Art does extraordinary things without coming alive through a QR code. I'm all for participatory art for the people and for public art in the wake of conversations about racism and monuments being taken down. What art means in the culture will be rich in ways we've never understood before. Public art won't be an inert thing that speaks only to power. When art addresses how complex it is to just get out of bed and navigate your day, then it's art that's true to my—and everyone's—experience." ●