

Clockwise from top left: a 1953 untitled work from her Unflyable Kite series; the artist working on *The Rose*, 1958–66; an untitled photomechanical from 1987, demonstrating her range across many media; and an untitled 1973 collage made from photographs, torn paper and paint.

## Jay DeFeo The reputation of a singular painter



BAY AREA ARTIST JAY DEFEO (1929-89) has been a rose-girded Sleeping Beauty of the art world for too long. A multimedia maven before the word postmodern was invented, she combined a cool and meticulous formalism with the emotional depth of an Abstract Expressionist.

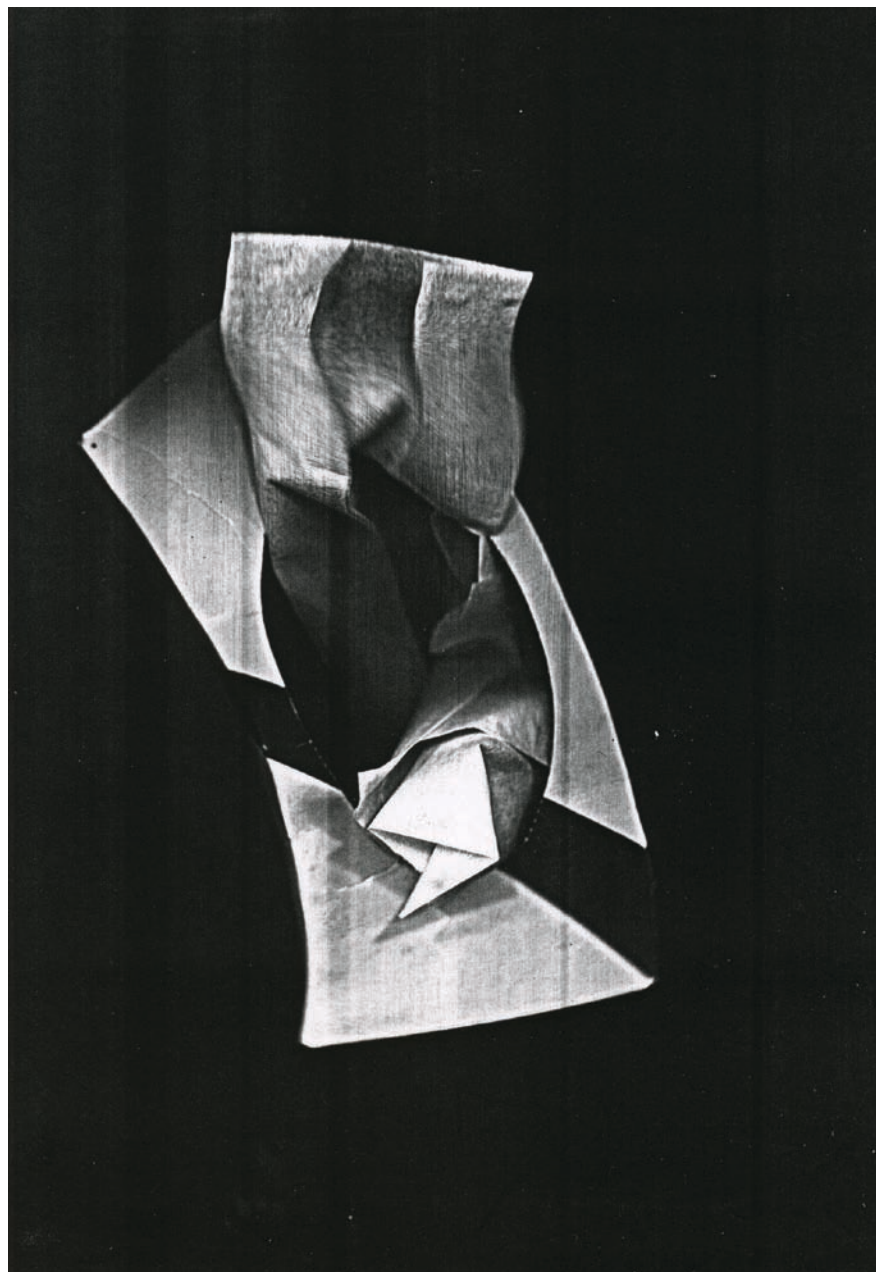
"She was singular," raves Whitney Museum of Art associate curator Dana Miller, who adds that in terms of sheer ability and substance, the closest comparisons are with Lee Bontecou and Eva Hesse.

So why haven't more people heard of DeFeo? In some ways, she has been hiding in plain sight. Proof of her talent has been available at the Whitney, which has exhibited DeFeo's *The Rose* (1958-66) three times over the past decade, most recently in 2003-04, and conserved it with the help of the estate. The work, which

DeFeo considered the "central core" of her achievement, is a 10-foot colossus on canvas that supports a literal ton of white and gray paint that she cut into grooves to form an architectonic abstraction of 18 radiating lines.

"*The Rose* is the female version of a Jackson Pollock gesture," Miller says, citing its breakthrough qualities as a geometric abstraction. But it may also have hindered DeFeo's career—she had to take a four-year hiatus after finishing the painting because she was so exhausted, and many have suggested that she was overidentified with that single work.

DeFeo spent her life in and around San Francisco. There she hung out with pals such as Bruce Conner, Wallace Berman and Jess and George Herms. Their work can be seen in "Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle," at Grey Art Gallery in New



## is finally gathering force. By Ellen Berkovitch

York through March 31.

The exhibit's independent co-curator, Michael Duncan, relates a story dating to 1960 that helps explain why DeFeo flew under the art world's radar. She and her husband, Wally Hedrick, were included in the seminal MoMA show "Sixteen Americans"—which included Frank Stella, among others—but chose to stay home rather than attend, giving away their tickets to the opening. Duncan calls it "a great move of anticareerism." He adds that it wasn't the only factor keeping the artist on the sidelines: "DeFeo was marginalized as a woman, and as an artist from California."

Her versatility may also have contributed to her relative obscurity despite consistent critical acclaim. DeFeo worked ambitiously and prolifically across media. As Dana Miller

puts it, she "was not an artist who just disappeared." At different stages, she produced brightly colorful paintings on paper and linen—including *Untitled '53*, with its splashy kite forms—jewelry, sculpture and photography.

No auction records exist for DeFeo's work, which, although embraced by artist peers and California galleries during her lifetime, rarely made it to New York. Signs of her emergence onto a broader scene have been cropping up of late, however. Last fall Greenberg Van Doren offered *Untitled '53* for \$90,000. DeFeo's 1958 painting *The Jewel* now lives in the permanent Abstract Expressionist room at LACMA, and SFMOMA and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts have been collecting her photography and collages—lesser-

known areas of DeFeo's work. WACK!, a show devoted to women artists in Los Angeles opening this month, features half a dozen or more of her 1970s tripod studies. And the Whitney, which holds the largest public collection of DeFeo's work, 15 pieces, plans to mount a retrospective in the next few years.

DeFeo's estate, established in 1991 and co-managed by trustees Leah Levy and C. Ursula Cipa, has been tightly controlling and some say erratic. It severed relations with the artist's longtime San Francisco gallery, Paule Anglim, and has only occasionally sanctioned shows in New York. "We have been an estate that is off market," Leah Levy says. "It has been hard to find the right match." She adds that her vision is to serve primarily as a resource for scholars and curators, which goes a

long way to explaining why DeFeo's prices have lagged.

Last summer the estate authorized the first DeFeo show in two years: Dwight Hackett Projects, in Santa Fe, exhibited the artist's 1970s botanical photographs (\$6,500) and 1980s works on paper (\$25,000–\$75,000). Collectors snapped up works, including *Nane*, 1987, (\$25,000), a mountain drawing inspired by DeFeo's 1986 trip to Mount Kilimanjaro, and the drawing *Eternal Triangle*, 1980, (\$55,000). This fall, from October 20 to November 17, the Nielsen Gallery, in Boston, will mount a show of DeFeo's work. With any luck, the future Whitney show and the constellation of smaller exhibits around it will finally ensure that the splendor of DeFeo's full oeuvre blooms as vigorously as her restored *Rose*.