

# ARTFORUM

## Jay DeFeo

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART  
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street  
February 28–June 2

Four years ago, the Whitney presented an exhibition by a renowned artist whose work, for some, wavered on the brink of kitsch. Georgia O'Keeffe, so celebrated for her petunias and lilies, seemed like another person: The bold and graphic abstractions on view proved overwhelming. Even Alfred Stieglitz's racy photographs of O'Keeffe posing nude with her paintings looked fresh. Now, the museum is taking on another difficult and sometimes discounted artist—Jay DeFeo, best known for a flower of her own (*The Rose*, 1958–66)—by mounting an elegant and revelatory retrospective.

Comparisons between O'Keeffe and DeFeo could go on. In 1976, the younger American remarked about the dowager, "I feel that she is probably motivated, much as I am myself, by natural forms, and I think I respond to them much as she does." Yet the strength of this exhibition is its focus on the robust individuality and moxie of DeFeo's oeuvre. Her lifelong resistance to categorization and a signature style is evinced throughout the show—in her early jewelry, the midcareer photographic experimentations, and the chapel-like room that can barely contain *The Rose*—but also in her later paintings, which blend hardedge abstraction with Minimalism and a hermeneutic interest in materiality. One is always left wondering if DeFeo's subjects are organic, manufactured, or some compelling hybrid.

Not on view, but thankfully included in the excellent catalogue, is a selection of Wallace Berman's 1959 gelatin silver prints of DeFeo posing nude, spread-eagle, and sometimes pinned against *The Rose*. These images, as well as *The Eyes*, 1958 (which was based on her eyes and is installed directly across from *The Rose*), portray the unblinking visionary as self-aware, unafraid to gaze directly forward, or back at us. That's also how DeFeo's friends in the Bay Area, where she lived nearly all her life, have largely remembered her: driven and animated by a strong life force. If the rest of the world hasn't yet caught up to DeFeo as equally essential and as master blasting as Eva Hesse, Lee Bontecou, Lee Lozano, and, yes, Ms. O'Keeffe—this exhibition says we must. And we will.



Jay DeFeo, *The Eyes*, 1958, graphite on paper, 42 x 84 3/4".

— Lauren O'Neill-Butler