

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

BRUCE CONNER & JAY DEFEO ("we are not what we seem")

524 W 26th Street

Thursday, September 9 – Saturday, October 23, 2021

Bruce Conner and Jay DeFeo were close friends who met in the 1950s as part of the Beat-adjacent group of artists based in San Francisco. The Conner Family Trust, The Jay DeFeo Foundation, and the Paula Cooper Gallery are delighted to present the first ever two-person exhibition of their work.

From 1958 to 1966 Jay DeFeo worked on *The Rose*, a monumental painting massive in both scale and concept. When the work had to be removed from DeFeo's second-story studio in 1965, Conner filmed the extraordinary task. The seven-and-a-half-minute film is an ode to DeFeo and her art, and became an important document testifying to the significance of *The Rose* as legend of it proliferated. Throughout their careers Conner and DeFeo were in frequent communication, exchanging images and reproducing each other's works. These drawings, collages, photographs, and photocopies accompany an installation of Conner's film THE WHITE ROSE (1967), shining new light on his and DeFeo's artistic relationship and parallel trajectories.

The work DeFeo made after *The Rose* is distinguished from what came before by its agility and the use of new media such as photography, which she took up in earnest in 1971. Although DeFeo did not go so far as to adopt a new persona (one of many tactics used by Conner to differentiate distinct bodies of work) she shared with him an interest in adapting artistic identity. In the 1970s DeFeo directly incorporated Conner's works into her own, using the silhouetted form of his ANGELS as a container for her collages, and photographing his works hanging in her studio. Conner produced a number of works that were explicit homages to DeFeo, and credited her with inspiring his hanging assemblages. When not in direct conversation, their works often shared common themes, such as an attention to parts of the body, and to the ritualistic, symbolic, and surreal. A clear and consistent thread connecting their work across media is the experimental re-imaging and recycling of found objects and forms, including their own and each other's works.

In the mid-1970s DeFeo noted that "*The Rose* is a part of Bruce's career as well as a part of mine" and it is fitting that the film is installed for the first time as the focus of an exhibition of both artist's work.¹ In her exhibition catalogue essay, Rachel Federman writes that "the site-specific environment of *The Rose*, with its glittering, paint-encrusted floors and walls, deeply affected Conner, who on several occasions endeavored to create a similar, totalizing effect with installations of his own work." The current installation of the film in an immersive screening room approaches this ideal of an all-encompassing work in a posthumous realization of a shared ideal.

¹ Jay DeFeo, oral history interview with Paul Karlstrom, July 18, 1975. Audio recording, Smithsonian Archives of American Art website (aaa.si.edu).

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Bruce Conner (1933-2008, b. McPherson, Kansas) was one of the foremost American artists of the postwar era. Emerging from the California art scene, Conner's work in sculpture, collage, painting, drawing, and film touches on various themes of postwar American society, from a rising consumer culture to the dread of nuclear apocalypse. In 2016, Conner was the subject of the major monographic survey "BRUCE CONNER: IT'S ALL TRUE," organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The survey opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and traveled to SFMOMA and the Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid. In 2000, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, organized an exhibition of Conner's work titled "2000 BC: THE BRUCE CONNER STORY, PART II" which traveled to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. Throughout his career, his work was included in major historic exhibitions, such as "The Art of Assemblage" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961. Conner's works are in the collections of many major museums, including The Guggenheim Museum; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; The Whitney Museum of American Art; The Museum of Modern Art; The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; The Art Institute of Chicago; The Morgan Library, New York, The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC; and The Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Over the course of a career spanning four decades, **Jay DeFeo** (1929-1989, b. Hanover, New Hampshire) experimented widely with a range of unorthodox materials, exploring the parameters of painting, sculpture, drawing, collage, photocopies, and photography. In 1959 her work was featured in "Sixteen Americans" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. From 1959 to 1966 DeFeo worked almost exclusively on her masterpiece, *The Rose*. First exhibited in 1969 at the Pasadena Art Museum, California, the work was subsequently installed at the San Francisco Art Institute, before being acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1995. In 2012 the Whitney organized "Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective," which traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. One-person exhibitions of DeFeo's work have taken place at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA (1990), and the San Jose Museum of Art, California (2019), among others. In 2018 Le Consortium in Dijon, France, organized "Jay DeFeo: The Ripple Effect," a show examining her legacy and lasting influence on contemporary artists working today, which travelled to the Aspen Art Museum. DeFeo's works are in the collections of many major museums, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Art Institute of Chicago; The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; Tate Modern, London, and The Centre Pompidou, Paris.