

WHITNEY



**JAY DEFEO:
A RETROSPECTIVE
TEACHER GUIDE**

February 28, 2013–June 2, 2013

ABOUT THIS TEACHER GUIDE

How can these materials be used?

These materials provide a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offer suggestions for follow up classroom reflection and lessons. The discussions and activities introduce some of the exhibition's key themes and concepts.

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Which grade levels are these materials intended for?

These lessons and activities have been written for Elementary, Middle, or High School students. We encourage you to adapt and build upon them in order to meet your teaching objectives and students' needs.

Learning standards

The projects and activities in these curriculum materials address national and state learning standards for the arts, English language arts, social studies, and technology.

The Partnership for Twenty-first Century Learning Skills

<http://www.p21.org/>

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Links to National Learning Standards

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Comprehensive guide to National Learning Standards by content area

<http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml>

New York State Learning Standards

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.html>

New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts

<http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/teachlearn/arts/blueprint.html>

Feedback

Please let us know what you think of these materials. Email us at schoolprograms@whitney.org.

For more information about our programs and resources, please visit whitney.org/Education.

Cover image:

Jay DeFeo (1929–1989), Untitled, 1973. Collage with cut gelatin silver print, torn paper, and paint on gelatin silver print photogram, 10 × 8 in. (25.4 × 20.3 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; purchase through a gift of Robin Wright and the Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Barbara and Gerson Bakar, Shawn and Brook Byers, Jean and James E. Douglas, Jr., Pamela and Richard Kramlich, Mary and Howard Lester, and Nancy and Steven Oliver. © 2013 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Don Ross

AT THE MUSEUM

Guided visits

We invite you and your students to visit the Whitney to see the exhibition *American Legends: From Calder to O'Keeffe*, on view at the Whitney from December 22, 2012 through December 2013. To schedule a visit, please visit whitney.org/education/k12. Guided visits are hour-long thematic tours that build upon classroom learning. We introduce students to three to five works of art through careful looking, discussions, and activities that incorporate the artist's voice and process. Museum educators lead inquiry based conversations as well as sketching or writing activities in the galleries.

Guided Visit Themes

School Programs uses a thematic-based approach to teaching in the galleries. We created these themes in order to foster thoughtful connections between K-12 classroom learning and the art on view. When you schedule a guided visit, you will be able to choose one of the following themes.

Artist as Observer (K-12)

How do artists represent the world around them? How do they choose to show people and places? This theme can address topics including New York City, community, landscape, and portraiture. This is a great thematic tour for first-time visitors as it incorporates visual literacy skills and introduces students to multiple ways of looking at and talking about art.

Artist as Storyteller (K-12)

How do artists tell a story? What is their point of view? This theme addresses ELA concepts such as narrative, tone, character, and setting and is recommended for literacy and writing classes.

Artist as Experimenter (K-12)

How do artists push boundaries and explore new concepts? This theme examines how artists experiment with materials, processes, and ideas. Younger students may look at how artists use formal elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and composition, or how they transform everyday objects. Older students may consider more conceptual questions, such as "What makes this art?" and "Why is this in a museum?"

Artist as Critic (6-12)

How do artists respond to the social, political, and cultural climate of their time? What does their work tell us about American life and culture? How can art serve as a catalyst for change? Students examine how artists respond to the topics that shape history, politics, and contemporary culture. This thematic tour can address subjects such as current events, war, gender, race, politics, and activism.

Working with Museum Educators

If you are scheduled for a guided visit, your museum educator will contact you in advance. Let them know what preparatory work you have done, how this connects to the rest of your curricula, and what you would like your visit to focus on. The more you tell them, the better they can prepare for your visit. Please also let them know if your students have any specific needs. If you are visiting during public hours, you and your students (in chaperoned groups) are welcome to stay after your guided tour.

All educators and students who have a guided tour will receive a pass which offers free admission to the Whitney through the end of the school year.

Self-guided visits

High School students are welcome to visit the museum during public hours in a self-guided capacity. Self-guided visits must be scheduled in advance. A maximum of 60 students may arrive at the museum together and must then divide into small groups (no more than 4 students) to visit the galleries. One chaperone must accompany 15 students.

Discuss museum rules with students before your visit. We have found that works of art are more accessible if students are provided with some structure or direction, and we recommend giving students a task to complete while in the galleries. You may want to create a worksheet, free-writing or poetry activity, or a sketching assignment.

whitney.org/ForTeachers

Check out our new web resources especially for K-12 teachers! Here you can explore the Whitney's collection, try out an activity with your students, prepare for a Museum visit, and learn some tips for working with modern and contemporary art. For Teachers also includes a Build Your Own Collection feature, discussion, research, art making, and writing activities, downloadable teacher guides, and links to related websites.

We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Whitney!

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION JAY DEFEO: A RETROSPECTIVE

Jay DeFeo (1929–1989) set a fiercely independent course and created an astoundingly diverse body of artwork over a career that spanned more than forty-five years. Her unconventional approach to materials and intensive, physical process make DeFeo a unique figure in postwar American art. Her works can be measured either in inches or in feet, in ounces or in tons, and range from painting, drawing, jewelry, and photography to various hybrids that confound standard classifications and illuminate DeFeo's courageous experimentation and extraordinary vision.

Born Mary Joan DeFeo in Hanover, New Hampshire, she moved with her family as a young child to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she remained for most of her life. After receiving undergraduate and graduate degrees in studio art from the University of California, Berkeley, she came to the fore professionally as part of a vibrant community of avant-garde artists, poets, and musicians active in San Francisco in the mid-1950s, a moment often referred to as the Beat era.

DeFeo believed that her art was best understood when considered comprehensively. To date, she has been most noted for her monumental painting *The Rose*, which she spent almost eight years making, beginning in 1958. When this work was completed, it was estimated to weigh more than 1,500 pounds and the paint measured as much as 11 inches deep in places. *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective* is the first exhibition to situate *The Rose* in the broader context of the artist's career.

In an effort to consider the full scope of her production, this presentation extends beyond the themes and techniques of that iconic painting to explore the visual concerns that arise throughout DeFeo's work: key shapes and symbols that made up her primarily geometric vocabulary, a centrally located form or image, an emphasis on surface texture, and a tension between compositional order and her sensuous response to her materials.

Throughout, DeFeo never hesitated to tackle the biggest subjects of all: cosmic and terrestrial forces of nature and the worlds inhabited by the imagination and the spirit. In taking such an expansive view, this retrospective demonstrates in an unprecedented manner the captivating sweep of DeFeo's heterogeneous work, illuminating her extraordinary vision and the groundbreaking, experimental nature of four decades of her art.

Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective is organized by Dana Miller, Curator of the Permanent Collection at the Whitney. The exhibition was previously on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from November 3, 2012 to February 3, 2013.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Before visiting the Whitney, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and themes in the *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective* exhibition. You may want to introduce students to at least one work of art that they will see at the Museum. See the **Images and Related Information** section of this guide on pages 8-14 for examples of works that may have particular relevance to the classroom.

Objectives:

Introduce students to the ways in which Jay DeFeo saw the world around her and to some of her working processes.

Introduce students to the themes they may encounter on their museum visit such as “Artist as Observer” and “Artist as Experimenter.”

Jay DeFeo (1928-1989) came to the fore as part of a vibrant community of vanguard artists, poets, and musicians in San Francisco during the 1950s. Her unconventional approach to materials and her intensive, cross-disciplinary practice make her a unique figure in postwar American art. DeFeo often worked with a subject iteratively, across painting, drawing, and photography. The themes of her work include the push and pull between abstraction and representation, the relationship of the fragment to the whole, and the periodic use of her camera as a type of sketchbook. Many of DeFeo’s photographs served as reference points for her paintings and drawings, in which the original objects are transformed into abstracted forms.

Artist as Observer: Looking From All Angles

Here was this cup, and she began to look at it. She began to turn it. She began to stand over it, look up from below it, look at it from every conceivable angle, look into it, look at it out of the corner of her eye.

—Greil Marcus

Interview with Greil Marcus, *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*, audio guide, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013.

Jay DeFeo looked closely at everything in her surroundings, including manmade objects such as her swimming goggles, camera tripods, shoe trees, a silver dish, and broken items such as a tape dispenser and a cup handle.

Discuss Greil Marcus’s quote with your students, then ask them to find a partner and select a small object. Have students look carefully at the object from all angles—from a distance, close up, from above, from below, upside down, out of the corner of their eye. Notice the shape, surface, texture, color, and the way that light falls on the object. Ask students to describe what they see to each other and report their observations to the class. What did they discover?

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

1. Artist as Experimenter: Through Jay DeFeo's Eyes

In 1958 Jay DeFeo made a seven-foot wide drawing of a pair of eyes. The model for the drawing was probably based on a narrow strip of a black-and-white photograph picturing DeFeo's eyes. For DeFeo, looking at the photograph of her eyes while making the work was similar to seeing her reflection in a mirror. This drawing of her eyes was the "aperture" through which DeFeo was able to envision her subsequent works—in particular *The Rose* (1958-66).

Ask your students to view and discuss DeFeo's drawing, *The Eyes* (1958) on page 9. Let students know that this drawing is seven feet wide. What do they notice? Discuss how DeFeo's drawing of her eyes is both similar and different from a real pair of eyes. If students could view the world through DeFeo's eyes in the drawing, what do they imagine they might see?

Ask students to find a partner and choose a detail of their face (for example, eyes, lips, nose, ears, teeth). Have them ask their partner to take a digital photograph of this detail. Ask each student to make a drawing from the photograph, using a large sheet of paper and pencil. View and discuss students' drawings. Ask students to describe the experience of observing a detail of their own face. How did they represent the detail?

2. Artist as Experimenter: *The Rose*

Jay DeFeo began her seminal work, *The Rose* in 1958. For almost eight years, she kept applying thick paint, carving into it, chiseling away at it, and applying more paint.

View and discuss *Jay DeFeo on the making of The Rose* on the Jay DeFeo Trust website:

http://www.jaydefeo.org/therose.html#img/therose1_full.jpg

Explore the changes DeFeo made to *The Rose* as she worked on it. How did she transform it?

Ask students to take a close look at the image of *The Rose* (1958-66) on page 10.

What do they notice?

Use the information on page 11 to let students know what happened to *The Rose*.

3. Installing *The Rose*

The Rose is one of the most complicated works in the Whitney's collection to install. On February 15, 2013, the work was installed at the Museum as part of the exhibition. The work arrived in New York from California, where the exhibition had finished a successful run at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Paula Court documented the installation that day from start to finish.

Ask your students to watch and discuss a slide show of installing *The Rose* at the Whitney:

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/JayDeFeo/InstallingTheRose>

When you visit the Museum, compare and discuss the experience of seeing *The Rose* in reproduction and seeing the real work of art. What do students notice that they didn't see in the reproduction?

POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Objectives

Enable students to reflect upon and discuss some of the ideas and themes from the exhibition *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*.

Have students further explore some of the artist's approaches through discussion, writing, and art-making activities.

Museum Visit Reflection

After your museum visit, ask students to take a few minutes to write about their experience. What do they remember most? What did they learn about the artist? What new ideas did the exhibition give them? What other questions do they have? Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.

1. Artist as Observer: personal symbolism collage

Throughout the 1970s, DeFeo experimented with a variety of photographic processes, including photograms: cameraless images created by placing objects directly on photographic paper, which is then exposed to light. For her photo collage, *Untitled* (1973), on page 13, Jay DeFeo affixed a painted photograph she had made of a rose to a photogram of her hand.

Ask your students find two personal objects that are meaningful to them. Use digital cameras or smartphones to photograph one of the objects. Ask students to think carefully about the angle or viewpoint of their picture. Consider using smartphone apps such as Instagram or computers and image software such as Photoshop to manipulate or alter the photograph—for example, enlarge, crop, experiment with color, texture, filters, and effects.

Ask your students to use sun print or nature print paper to make photograms of their second object. Have students combine their digital images and photograms into a collage.

View and discuss students' collages. What objects did students choose to represent themselves? How did they combine them?

2. Artist as Experimenter: an artwork with a center

When Jay DeFeo began *The Rose*, she had just a vague concept of the composition. She said that "Only a center governed the image." As a class, brainstorm the different ways a work of art could have a center. What would this work look like?

Ask your students to think of a central image they would like to use to create a layered artwork. Have them experiment with paper materials in your classroom such as tissue paper, wrapping paper, magazines, newspapers, digital images, and sculpture materials such as papier-mâché and Model Magic. What central image did they choose? How did they create their centered artworks?

Dana Miller. "Jay DeFeo: A Slow Curve," *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*. (exh cat) New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Yale University Press, 2012, 24.

IMAGES AND RELATED INFORMATION

We have included some selected images from the exhibition, along with relevant information that you may want to use before or after your museum visit. You can print out the images or project them in your classroom.

THE EYES, 1958



Jay DeFeo, *The Eyes*, 1958. Graphite on paper, 42 × 84 3/4 in. (106.7 × 215.3 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the Lannan Foundation 96.242.3
© 2009 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In 1958 DeFeo made a riveting, seven-foot-wide drawing of a pair of eyes that was likely modeled on a black-and-white photograph of her own eyes. She inscribed the back of the drawing with a stanza from a contemporaneous poem by Philip Lamantia that resonated with the finished work: “Tell Him I have eyes only for Heaven / as I look to you / Queen mirror / of the heavenly court.” DeFeo used the first line as the full title of the work for several years before it became known simply as *The Eyes*. This piece functioned as an aperture through which DeFeo said she was able to envision future works, specifically *The Rose* (1958–66). The two compositions have been installed facing each other in this exhibition to highlight this connection, as if these large-scale eyes were, in fact, DeFeo’s eyes visualizing the monumental painting she would soon begin.

In DeFeo’s words:

At the risk of sounding a little bit overly romantic or something, I really kind of felt as though I was seeing The Rose to come through the doing of this drawing. It was a very important drawing for me to do. It was almost a kind of visionary experience for me, as though I were seeing from the inside out.

Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective, audio guide, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013.

THE ROSE, 1958-66



Jay DeFeo, *The Rose*, 1958–66. Oil with wood and mica on canvas, 128 7/8 x 92 1/4 x 11 in. (327.3 x 234.3 x 27.9 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the Estate of Jay DeFeo and purchase with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee and the Judith Rothschild Foundation 95.170
© 2009 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

THE ROSE, 1958-66 (CONTINUED)

Jay DeFeo began this monumental work simply as an idea that “would have a center.” Initially, the painting measured approximately 9 × 7 feet and was called *Deathrose*, but in 1959, the artist transferred the work onto a larger canvas with the help of friends. She continued to work on *The Rose* for the next seven years, applying thick paint, carving into it, chiseling it away, and inserting wooden dowels to help support the heavier areas of impasto.

By 1960, the work was so large that it filled the bay window of DeFeo’s studio. When a rent hike forced her out of her studio in the fall of 1965, movers cut out part of the bay window and wall and lowered the painting down from the second story using a forklift. Then called *The White Rose*, it was transported to the Pasadena Art Museum, where DeFeo added the finishing touches in 1966. In 1969, DeFeo renamed it again. Nearly eleven feet tall and weighing nearly a ton, the work’s dense, multi-layered surface became, in DeFeo’s words, “a marriage between painting and sculpture.”

The Rose was first exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art in the spring of 1969, and then transported to the San Francisco Art Institute and installed in a newly built conference room. In 1974 it was covered with a protective casing. *The Rose* remained there, entirely hidden from view, until 1995, when it was conserved under the sponsorship of the Whitney Museum and brought to New York, where it was acquired by the Museum and exhibited. DeFeo resisted offering an explanation or interpretation of the work, although she did acknowledge that despite the work’s enormous size and rough surfaces, there was a connection to “the way actual rose petals are formed and how they relate to each other in the flower.”

Maxwell L. Anderson. *American Visionaries: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art*. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), 87.

Extended object label, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003.

THE ROSE, 1958-66 (CONTINUED)



Jay DeFeo working on what was then titled *Deathrose*, 1960. Photograph by Burt Glinn. © Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos

UNTITLED, 1973



Jay DeFeo (1929–1989), *Untitled*, 1973. Collage with cut gelatin silver print, torn paper, and paint on gelatin silver print photogram, 10 × 8 in. (25.4 × 20.3 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; purchase through a gift of Robin Wright and the Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Barbara and Gerson Bakar, Shawn and Brook Byers, Jean and James E. Douglas, Jr., Pamela and Richard Kramlich, Mary and Howard Lester, and Nancy and Steven Oliver. © 2013 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Don Ross

Floral forms continued to appear regularly in DeFeo's later paintings and photographs. For this photo collage she affixed a painted photograph she had made of a rose to a photogram of her hand. Throughout the 1970s, DeFeo experimented extensively with a variety of photographic processes, including photograms: cameraless images created by placing objects directly on photographic paper, which is then exposed to light. The crisp detail of the rose's petals, combined with the torn edge of the paper on which it is printed, lends a sculptural quality to the work and stands in stark contrast to the indistinct form of the hand beneath. The juxtaposition is abrupt, and the resulting effect is one of distance: a ghostly hand that has lost its grip on the delicate flower.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

JAY DEFEO, 1929-1989

Jay DeFeo was born Mary Joan DeFeo, in Hanover, New Hampshire. She spent most of her youth in California, and attended the University of California, Berkeley where she received a BA in 1950 and an MA in 1951. Awarded a fellowship to travel in Europe in 1951, DeFeo spent a number of months painting in Florence. Returning to the United States in 1953, she settled in San Francisco just as the Beat movement was taking off. DeFeo and her friends George Herms, Bruce Connor, and Joan Brown became stars of the San Francisco avant-garde art and poetry world of the 1950s. Her first solo show was in a tavern: a Beat hangout called The Place. DeFeo married fellow painter Wally Hedrick, and the couple set up a studio on Fillmore Street that became a gathering place for Beat poets, musicians, and other artists.

DeFeo's work of the 1950s was influenced by the reigning Abstract Expressionist movement, but she soon began experimenting with unorthodox materials. These experiments led to DeFeo's landmark creation, *The Rose*, which would consume her for eight years between 1958 and 1966. DeFeo's process involved an obsessive layering of paint, resulting in a canvas that was almost a foot thick in some places. Upon the completion of *The Rose* in 1966, she took a four-year break from making art. During the 1970s and 1980s, she worked extensively in an array of media, including photography, collage, drawing, and painting, often limiting herself to a palette of blacks, grays, and whites. DeFeo described herself as a "formalist", saying that the process of making art was, for her, "an exploration, an experimentation and a sheer love of materials." She taught at various colleges throughout her career, eventually becoming a professor of art at Mills College in 1980.

Jay DeFeo, interview with Leela Elliott, October 1, 1986 in Moira Roth, ed, *Connecting Conversations: Interviews with 28 Bay Area Women Artists*. Oakland CA: Eucalyptus Press, Mills College, 1988, 46.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND LINKS

Dana Miller. *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*. (exh cat) New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Yale University Press, 2012.

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/JayDeFeo>

The Whitney's exhibition page for *Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective*.

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/JayDeFeo/InstallingTheRose>

A slide show of installing *The Rose* at the Whitney:

<http://whitney.org/Education>

The Whitney's website includes information about programs for teachers, teens, children, and families.

<http://whitney.org/ForTeachers>

The Whitney's collection and resources for K-12 teachers.

<http://whitney.org/ForKids>

A special area of the Whitney's website with resources and activities for artists ages 8-12.

<http://www.jaydefeo.org/>

The Jay DeFeo Trust.

http://www.jaydefeo.org/therose.html#img/therose1_full.jpg

Jay DeFeo on the making of The Rose.

http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/podcast/artcast_153

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SF MoMA) Artcast Storyboard.

<http://www.blurb.com/>

A site for creating online books.

<http://us.moo.com/>

A resource for creating all kinds of cards.

<http://pinterest.com/>

Pinterest is a virtual pinboard—a content sharing site that allows members to “pin” images, videos, and other objects to their pinboard. The site also includes standard social networking features.

<http://instagram.com/>

A free image-altering app for iPhone and Android devices.

<http://www.tumblr.com/explore>

A user-friendly micro-blogging platform for posting multimedia content.

<http://twitter.com/about>

Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service where users send and read each other's updates, known as *tweets*—text-based posts of up to 140 characters, displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to other users—known as followers—who have subscribed to them.

CREDITS

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