



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Jay DeFeo Papers, circa 1940s-1979, in the Archives of American Art

Helen MacDiarmid and Stephanie Ashley

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	
Administrative Information	1
Biographical / Historical	2
Scope and Contents	2
Arrangement	3
Names and Subjects	
Container Listing	
Series 1: Biographical Material, 1948-1969	5
Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1950-1979	6
Series 3: Writings, circa 1950-circa 1960s	9
Series 4: Personal Business Records, 1955-1974	10
Series 5: Printed Material, 1956-1975	11
Series 6: Photographs, circa 1940s-circa 1970s	12
Series 7: Artwork, circa 1950s-circa 1960s	15

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Jay DeFeo papers
Date:	circa 1940s-1979
Identifier:	AAA.defejay
Creator:	DeFeo, Jay, 1929-1989
Extent:	1.5 Linear feet
Language:	Collection is in English.
Summary:	The papers of California painter Jay DeFeo measure 1.5 linear feet and date from circa 1940s to 1979. The collection provides scattered documentation of DeFeo's career, and details on her seminal work, <i>The Rose</i> , through biographical material, correspondence with friends and colleagues, personal business records, writings by others, printed material, photographs highlighting DeFeo's prominent role in her community, and artwork.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Donated between 1975-1981 by Jay DeFeo.

Related Materials

The Archives of American Art has an oral history interview with DeFeo conducted 1975 June 3-1976 January 23 by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of America Art. An 83 page transcript is available online. The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley holds some of DeFeo's archival materials.

Available Formats

The collection was digitized in 2022 and is available on the Archives of American Art website.

Processing Information

The collection was microfilmed on 35 mm microfilm reels 1645, 908, 2673, and 3957 at some point after receipt. It was processed to a minimal level and a finding aid prepared by Helen MacDiarmid in 2014. The collection was further processed and the finding aid was updated by Stephanie Ashley in 2021. The papers were digitized in 2022 with funding from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

Jay DeFeo papers, circa 1940s-1970s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

This collection is open for research. Access to original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C. Research Center.

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Biographical / Historical

Expressionist and symbolist painter, photographer, and educator Jay DeFeo (1929-1989) was a central figure in the progressive community of artists, poets, and musicians of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1950s-1960s. She devoted eight years to producing her most celebrated painting, *The Rose*, and was known for her endlessly experimental cross-disciplinary work in painting, drawing, photography, and collage.

DeFeo was born in Hanover, New Hampshire, and was three years old when her family moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. She attended the University of California Berkeley and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in studio art in 1950-1951. She then traveled for eighteen months on a scholarship to France, Spain, North Africa, and Italy and spent six months in Florence producing her first significant body of work.

DeFeo returned to San Francisco in 1953 and married fellow artist Wally Hedrick in 1954. The couple rented a Victorian flat at 2322 Fillmore Street and actively participated in Beat counterculture, throwing large parties for their friends including artists, musicians, painters, poets, and photographers. Joan and Bill Brown were neighbors and the four artists shared ideas and space to such an extent that they cut a door in an adjoining wall so they could come and go between their two apartments with ease.

DeFeo's first solo exhibition was held at the Dilexi Gallery in 1959, and Dorothy Miller selected her work for her landmark *Sixteen Americans* exhibition the same year. After an exhibition at Ferus Gallery in 1960, DeFeo turned down other gallery affiliations to work almost exclusively on *The Rose*. Completed in the Fillmore Street flat in 1966, DeFeo's monumental work was first exhibited at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1969, and was later moved to the San Francisco Art Institute to await conservation.

DeFeo and Hedrick divorced in 1969, and DeFeo moved to Larkspur in Marin County to regroup from personal set-backs and the draining experience of working on *The Rose*. She taught part-time at various art institutions in California, and in 1981 moved to Oakland and joined the art faculty at Mills College, becoming a tenured professor in 1986. She worked prolifically as an artist to the end of her life.

The Rose underwent extensive conservation and in 1995 was purchased by the Whitney Museum of American Art for the museum's permanent collection. DeFeo's work has been exhibited extensively in the United States and Europe and can be found in the collections of major museums throughout the United States and abroad.

Scope and Contents

The papers of California painter Jay DeFeo measure 1.5 linear feet and date from circa 1940s to 1979. The collection provides scattered documentation of DeFeo's career, and details on her seminal work, *The Rose*, through biographical material, correspondence with friends and colleagues, personal business records, writings by others, printed material, photographs highlighting DeFeo's prominent role in her community, and artwork.

Correspondence, while scattered, contains some significant and illuminating letters. The series includes documentation of Bruce Conner's assistance in managing the moving and conservation of *The Rose*, correspondence with the Pasadena Art Museum regarding the first public showing of the work, and correspondence with the San Francisco Museum of Art and Tony Rockwell regarding its conservation. Other correspondents of note

include Wallace Berman, Irving Blum and Ferus Gallery, Mark Green, Frank Lobdell, Fred Martin, David Simpson, Ruth Terrill, and Eleanor (Nell) Sinton. Throughout the series letters both to and from DeFeo provide details on her thoughts about her work, personal and professional challenges and decisions at various stages of her career, and her artistic growth as she developed her interest in photography and other media.

Writings are by others and include reflections by Fred Martin on art and travel, and poems from Wallace Berman's self-published journal, *Semina*. Personal business records contain significant documentation of preservation costs for *The Rose*, the purchase of DeFeo's work, *Incision*, and the lease of the flat that was the site of DeFeo's personal and artistic growth and community for over a decade. Printed material includes scattered articles on artwork by DeFeo and others, posters announcing DeFeo's group and solo exhibitions at Ferus Gallery, and announcements and catalogs for others.

Photographs provide important documentation of DeFeo's pivotal role in the San Francisco art community and include some of the most reproduced images of her and others including Wally Hedrick and Joan Brown, taken by photographers such as Jerry Burchard, Wallace Berman, Wally Hedrick, and DeFeo. Many other personal photographs of group trips to the beach and parties at the Fillmore Street flat capture the camaraderie and vitality of the community to which DeFeo belonged.

Also found are several collages made by DeFeo, and artwork by others including Wallace Berman, and sketches by Al Wong.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as 7 series

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical material, 1948-1969 (2 folders; Box 1)
- Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1950-1979 (0.4 linear feet; Box 1, OV 3)
- Series 3: Writings, circa 1950s-circa 1960s (0.1 linear feet; Box 1, OV 3)
- Series 4: Personal Business Records, 1955-1974 (3 folders; Box 1)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1956-1975 (0.2 linear feet; Box 1, OV 3)
- Series 6: Photographs, circa 1940s-circa 1970s (0.5 linear feet; Boxes 1-2, OV 3)
- Series 7: Artwork, circa 1950s-circa 1960s (0.3 linear feet; Box 2)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Beat generation
Expressionism (Art)
Symbolism
Women artists
Women painters
Women photographers

Types of Materials:

Drawings

Names:

Berman, Wallace, 1926-1976

Blum, Irving, 1930-
Conner, Bruce, 1933-2008
Hedrick, Wally, 1928-2003
Terrill, Ruth

Occupations:

Painters -- California -- San Francisco
Photographers -- California -- San Francisco

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1948-1969

2 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Series houses four items: a passport annotated with notes, primarily names and addresses; DeFeo's University of California transcript for the 1950-1951 school year; DeFeo's Associates Degree from the University of California, Berkeley; and a document containing the start and end dates of her marriage to Wally Hedrick.

Available Formats: Series has been digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 1 [Passport, 1951](#)
Language: English.

Box 1, Folder 2 [Personal Documents, 1948-1969](#)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1950-1979

0.4 Linear feet (Box 1, OV 3)

Scope and Contents: Series consists of DeFeo's correspondence with friends, colleagues, art curators, museums, and galleries. Letters and cards to and from friends include discussions of life in San Francisco, personal challenges, and references to DeFeo's artwork.

Of note is correspondence with Bruce Conner documenting his assistance in helping to oversee conservation of *The Rose*, and other logistical and financial matters related to the work. DeFeo's exchanges with Conner document in some detail her feelings about the showing of the painting in Pasadena, and indicate the extent to which she was drained by the experience. They also reveal her complex feelings about the restoration of the work, and how it represents for her an attempt to "perpetuate the myth of the Rose." One letter from October 1972 refers to what may be lost archival material: "all documentary material prior to last year...however colorful in this comedy of errors, has been simply to [sic] painful to save." She also mentions how her teaching job brings much needed income, and how satisfying she is finding her explorations in photography. The correspondence with Conner is complemented by correspondence with the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Pasadena Art Museum which further document restoration and exhibition of *The Rose*.

Also found are scattered letters and photo collage postcards from Wallace Berman and Dean Stockwell to DeFeo. Other artists, galleries, and art curators represented in the collection include Frank Lobdell, Fred Martin, Michael McClure, Dorothy Miller, Margaret Peterson, Deborah Remington, Eleanor (Nell) Sinton, and Ruth Terrill. One letter to Irving Blum of Ferus Gallery expresses DeFeo's frustration that her inquiries to Blum have been ignored, and references her precarious financial situation and her hope that her work could represent a source of income. One letter to David Simpson provides insight into DeFeo's separation from Hedrick, her attempts to build a new life for herself, and reflections on their relationship.

Available Formats: Series has been digitized in entirety.

Arrangement: Some of the letters are missing pages. There are also some empty envelopes with no clear indication of which letters, if any, the envelopes belong to. Names of many of the correspondents have been provided in the container list to facilitate access, but in many cases there are 3-5 or less items per correspondent.

Box 1, Folder 3	Aurelius, Jean and Vagadu, 1969
Box 1, Folder 4	Berman, Wallace and Shirley, circa 1960s-circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 5	Berman, Wallace and Shirley, 1961-1972
Box 1, Folder 6	Blum, Irving; Brown, Bill and Joan, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 7	Conner, Bruce, circa 1972-1974
Box 1, Folder 8	Demetron, Jim, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 9	Ferus Gallery, 1960-1965
Box 1, Folder 10	Green, Mark, 1974-1975

Box 1, Folder 11	Getz, David; Goldberg, Gary, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 12	Hedrick, Wally, circa 1959-circa 1965
Box 1, Folder 13	Hoobby, Wendi, circa 1970s
Box 1, Folder 14	Hopps, Walter, circa 1950s
Box 1, Folder 15	Lew, Weyman, Lobdell, Frank; Loran, Erle, Lannan, J. Patrick, 1967-1973
Box 1, Folder 16	Martin, Fred, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 17	Mattis, Astria; McChesney; McClure, Mike; Monte Factor Ltd.; Museum of Modern Art, 1961-1979 Notes: Mattis item is empty envelope.
Box OV 3, Folder 1	Mattis, Astria, Oversized, 1961
Box 1, Folder 18	Neubert, George; New York University; Nordland, Jerry; Nyingma Institute, 1969-1973
Box 1, Folder 19	Pasadena Art Museum, 1962-1969
Box 1, Folder 20	Peterson, Margaret and Margaret Peterson Foundation, circa 1971-1974
Box 1, Folder 21	Riesman, Dick; Remington, Deborah; Ross (Town of), 1958-1973
Box 1, Folder 22	San Francisco Museum of Art, 1968-1974
Box 1, Folder 23	St. John, Terry; Sheahan, Tom, 1967-1974
Box 1, Folder 24	Shere, Charles; Simpson, David, 1967-circa 1973
Box 1, Folder 25	Sinton, Nell; Stockwell, Dean, circa 1960s-1974
Box 1, Folder 26	Terrill, Ruth, circa 1960s-1970s
Box 1, Folder 27	University of British Columbia; University of St. Thomas, 1964, 1975
Box 1, Folder 28	Wenger Gallery, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 29	Wong, Al, 1961-1972
Box 1, Folder 30	First Names Only, 1958-1973
Box 1, Folder 31	Fragments, circa 1950s-circa 1970s

Box 1, Folder 32

Unidentified, circa 1950s-1970s

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: Writings, circa 1950-circa 1960s

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1, OV 3)

Language: English.

Scope and Contents: This series contains reflections by Fred Martin on art and travel, sheet music from Wally Hedrick's *Studio 13 Jazz Band*, fragments of draft text for a Frank Lobdell catalogue by Walter Hopps, poems published in *Semina*, and a poem written to DeFeo by Anne Sullivan.

Available Formats: Series is digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 33	Hedrick, Wally, Sheet Music for Studio 13 Band, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 34	Hopps, Walter, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 35	Martin, Fred, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 36	Miscellaneous, circa 1950- circa 1952
Box OV 3, Folder 2	Poem by Sullivan, Anne, Oversized ("Sister of the Mind"), 1967
Box 1, Folder 37	Poems (Published in Semina)?, circa 1950s-circa 1960s

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 4: Personal Business Records, 1955-1974

3 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Series contains the 1955 rental agreement Wally Hedrick signed for the apartment he shared with DeFeo at 2322 Fillmore Street, and a 1965 document stating changes to the terms of the lease. Records also include a receipt for the San Francisco Museum of Art's purchase of *Incision*, a check DeFeo wrote to the San Francisco Museum of Art Conservation Laboratory to cover initial costs for preservation of *The Rose*; and a "lease plan with intent to purchase *Rose*" with the Oakland Museum. Also found are records documenting DeFeo's 1967 teaching contract with the San Francisco Art Institute.

Available Formats: Series is digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 38 [Financial Records and Receipts, circa 1967-1974](#)

Box 1, Folder 39 [Lease and Rental Agreement, 1955, 1965](#)

Box 1, Folder 40 [San Francisco Art Institute Faculty Contract, 1964-1974](#)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 5: Printed Material, 1956-1975

0.2 Linear feet (Box 1, OV 3)

Scope and Contents: This series contains catalogs, announcements and posters from galleries and museums for exhibitions of work by DeFeo and other artists including Wallace Berman, Wally Hedrick, Weyman Lew, Fred Martin, Michael McClure, and Arthur Richer. Also found are reviews and news articles about artwork by DeFeo, Hedrick, and other Bay Area artists, and conservation of *The Rose*.

Available Formats: The bulk of this series has been digitized. Items not digitized include catalogs, for which only the covers, title pages and/or relevant pages have been digitized.

Box 1, Folder 41	Announcements and Catalogs, Jay DeFeo in Group Exhibitions, 1956, 1970, 1975
Box OV 3, Folder 3	Announcements and Catalogs, DeFeo, Solo and Group Exhibition at Ferus Gallery, Oversized, 1959
Box 1, Folder 42	Announcements and Catalogs, Berman and Conner, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 43	Announcements and Catalogs, Hedrick, Lew, Lobdell, 1956-1975
Box 1, Folder 44	Announcements and Catalogs, Martin, McClure, Richer, Sinton, 1961-1974
Box OV 3, Folder 4	Announcements and Catalogs, Martin, McClure, Oversized, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 45	Announcements and Catalogs, Other Group Exhibitions, 1968, 1974
Box OV 3, Folder 5	Announcements, Other Events, Oversized, circa 1950s-circa 1975
Box OV 3, Folder 6	News Clipping, Fragment of DeFeo with The Rose, Oversized, 1961 Notes: Clipping mounted on paper
Box 1, Folder 46	News Clippings, 1960-1975

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 6: Photographs, circa 1940s-circa 1970s

0.5 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2, OV 3)

Scope and Contents: This series contains a wide range of images of DeFeo beginning with a folder of portraits from her high school years taken by her stepfather, through to circa 1970. Photographs include images taken by DeFeo herself, Wallace Berman, Jerry Burchard, Wally Hedrick, and others.

DeFeo is pictured in many of the photographs of beach trips, with Wally Hedrick in Christmas scenes, and at parties held at the Fillmore Street apartment and on the building's roof deck. Also found are photographs taken at Fillmore Street showing Hedrick and DeFeo at work, revealing various stages of progress on paintings such as *Incision* and *The Rose*. The photographs provide insight into the extent to which Fillmore Street served as both home, community gathering place, and studio. One folder contains two photos of DeFeo and others at her 1958 exhibition at Dilexi Gallery.

The series also includes many photographs of artist friends including Joan Brown, Manuel Neri, Deborah Remington, and David Simpson. There are photos of DeFeo's pet cats, roses, and other sources of inspiration. Photos of Hedrick include some of his artwork, including work in an exhibition at the New Mission Gallery, and photos of him with other musicians playing in the Studio 13 Jazz Band. Additional photos of musicians and concerts include a contact sheet of images of the Count Basie Orchestra, and two photos of singer Keeley Smith.

Photographs are in the form of black and white and color prints and snapshots, polaroids, contact sheets, small images from printed negative strips, and negatives. A number of photos were cut by DeFeo; according to notes found in this series, she often cut up photos for use in collages.

Available Formats: The bulk of this series has been digitized. Items not digitized include negatives for which prints exist; some of the small photos of cats, of which a sample has been digitized; and duplicates.

Box 1, Folder 47	DeFeo, Jay, 1940s
Box 1, Folder 48	DeFeo, Jay, circa 1950s
Box 1, Folder 49	DeFeo, Jay, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 50	DeFeo, Jay, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 51	DeFeo, Jay, and Fillmore Street/Studio, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 52	DeFeo, Jay and Fillmore Street/Studio, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 53	DeFeo, Jay and Hedrick, Wally, 1958
Box 1, Folder 54	DeFeo, Jay and Hedrick, Wally and Christmas Trees, 1950s-1970
Box 1, Folder 55	DeFeo, Jay and Hedrick, Wally, Christmas Trees, Negatives, 1958
Box 1, Folder 56	Beach Trips, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 57	Beach Trips, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 58	Beach Trips, circa 1950s-circa 1960s

Box 1, Folder 59	Beach Trips, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 60	Beach Trips, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 61	Beach Trips, Negatives, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 62	Exhibition, Dilexi Gallery, 1958
Box 1, Folder 63	Flowers ("Fillmore Street Roses"), circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 64	Friends, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 65	Friends, Brown, Bill and Joan, 1950s
Box 1, Folder 66	Friends, Brown, Joan, Negatives, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 67	Friends, Simpson, David, circa 1950s
Box 1, Folder 68	Friends, Students, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 69	Friends, Unidentified, circa 1960s-circa 1970s
Box 1, Folder 70	Hedrick, Wally, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 71	Hedrick, Wally, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 72	Hedrick, Wally, Artwork, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 73	Hedrick, Wally, Artwork and Exhibition, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 74	Hedrick, Wally, Artwork and Exhibition, Negatives, 1950s-1960s
Box 1, Folder 75	Mountain Cabin Trip, circa 1960s
Box 2, Folder 1	Musicians and Concerts, circa 1950s-1960s
Box OV 3, Folder 7	Musicians and Concerts, Studio 13 Band, Oversized, circa 1960s
Box 2, Folder 2	Other Subjects, circa 1950s-circa 1960s Notes: Includes photo by Edmund Shea
Box 2, Folder 3	Parties on Fillmore Street, 1950s-1960s
Box 2, Folder 4	Parties on Fillmore Street, 1950s-circa 1970
Box 2, Folder 5	Parties on Fillmore Street, Negatives, 1950s-1960s

Box 2, Folder 6 [Pets, 1950s-1960s](#)

Box 2, Folder 7 [Pets, 1950s-1960s](#)

Box OV 3, Folder 8 [Pets, Oversized, circa 1960s](#)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 7: Artwork, circa 1950s-circa 1960s

0.3 Linear feet (Box 2)

Arrangement: Series is arranged as two subseries.

- 7.1: Artwork by DeFeo, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
- 7.2: Artwork by Others, circa 1950s-circa 1960s

Available Series is digitized in entirety.
Formats:

Subseries 7.1: Artwork by DeFeo, circa 1950s-circa 1960s

Scope and Contents: This series contains a photo collage of DeFeo and Joan Brown, pieces from another photo collage, and two collages made for Wally Hedrick, including one of Hedrick's favorite musicians, Bunk Johnson. Also found is a magazine about the Giants baseball team with collage pieces, and a "slice" of her painting *The Rose*, accompanied by a note from DeFeo indicating that one year she sent pieces of the work as Christmas cards.

Box 2, Folder 8	Collages, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 2, Folder 9	Collages, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 2, Folder 10	Collage, "Bunk Johnson", circa 1960s
Box 2, Folder 11	Magazine with Collage, circa 1964
Box 2, Folder 12	The Rose, "Slice of", circa 1960s Image(s): Collages, Piece of The Rose, Sketches

Subseries 7.2: Artwork by Others, circa 1950s-circa 1960s

Scope and Contents: Artwork by others includes a collage from Batman Gallery, artwork produced by Wallace Berman and others, and sketches by Al Wong.

Box 2, Folder 13	"Batman Gallery" Collage, circa 1950s Image(s): Collage "Batman Gallery"
Box 2, Folder 14	Berman, Barbara, Collage
Box 2, Folder 15	Berman, Wallace and Others, circa 1950s-circa 1960s
Box 2, Folder 16	Jordan, Patti and Oaranos, circa 1960s
Box 2, Folder 17	Wong, Al, Sketches, circa 1960s

Box 2, Folder 18

Unidentified, circa 1960s

[Return to Table of Contents](#)