

On August 6 and August 9, 1945—the dates that mark the respective annihilations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—sixteen-year-old Jay DeFeo, a Beat Generation artist raised in California, was preparing to begin her senior year at San Jose High School. Seven years later, funded by a fellowship from the University of California, Berkeley, where DeFeo received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in art, she journeyed to London, Paris, and Florence. Her travels occurred while Great Britain exploded its first fission bomb on October 3, 1952, only to be trumped by the groundbreaking hydrogen bomb detonation performed by the U.S. one month afterward. Although almost every American artist coming of age during the Atomic Era (1945 – 1991) had a personal history punctuated by concurrent nuclear bomb developments, the Beat artists found the expectation that Americans co-exist with the new weapon particularly repugnant, whereas mainstream society—and indeed, other avant-garde artists—appeared ambivalent. Taciturn as to which side her feelings fell, DeFeo, in contrast to her many iconoclastic friends, was not known to have discussed the bomb in connection to her work. Yet evidence points to the ways she might have instead restricted atomic culture to the role of a visual resource from which to extract motifs and symbols, thereby distancing herself from it and neutralizing its influence.

Back in San Francisco, in 1958, her apartment doubled as a studio, providing some isolation from the events of the Cold War during the eight years she toiled unremittingly on her masterwork, *The Rose* (1958-1966, **fig. 1**). The idea for this massive painting came in the same year (1958) that experienced the second highest number of nuclear bomb tests in history and, as a byproduct, a great deal of explosive imagery. I propose that these sensational visuals perhaps informed the symbolical significance in *The Rose* and certain other works. Scholars have often repeated that DeFeo considered herself “an expressionist as well as a symbolist,” but none have recognized that, by definition, one must ascertain the attributes of the former by formal analysis,

and the latter must ultimately involve iconological interpretation. In answer to Erwin Panofsky, who challenges his fellow art historians to evaluate even unintended symbolic content, this paper will reassess what it means to call DeFeo a symbolist based on the premise that certain artworks are not benign but charged with “atomic” metaphors she may have embedded in them.

I would argue DeFeo created a Cold War icon—an atomic image—in her magnum opus *The Rose*, deriving both meaning and emotional impact from the mushroom cloud. True to the aims of her New York abstract expressionist contemporaries, such as Jackson Pollock, she refused to discuss her work in terms of personal meaning, insisting upon the universality of the image. While the mushroom cloud will forever be emblematic of Americans’ experience of terror and potential obliteration during the Cold War, *The Rose*, when interpreted as a blast, symbolizes timeless states of being: birth and loss, hope and fear. For her it embodied a multitude of observable and metaphysical opposites, perhaps the most fundamental being its evocation of the life cycle. If she read John Hersey’s exceedingly popular historical non-fiction, *Hiroshima*, the process of renewal that it described must have piqued her curiosity. Just a few weeks after the blast, lingering high concentrations of radiation promoted spectacular plant growth, enveloping buildings and rubble in a dazzling, multi-chromatic display:

Weeds already hid the ashes, and wild flowers were in bloom among the city’s bones...Especially in a circle at the center, sickle senna grew in extraordinary regeneration, not only standing among the charred remnants of the same plant but pushing up in new places...It actually seemed as if a load of sickle-senna seed had been dropped along with the bomb.

In relation to the life-death paradox and even to floral symbolism, the bomb presented the most striking and timely an example from which DeFeo could draw inspiration for her *Rose*.

Few people would recognize Jay DeFeo’s name without mention of it in the context of this resonant reference point—an enormous painting measuring approximately 10.5 feet tall, 7.5 feet wide, and 11 inches at its thickest point. The incredible size may lead one to speculate that

The Rose is a product of eight years of paint accumulation, when, in fact, it took several trials of building up the canvas and then scraping it down before DeFeo reached a satisfying form. Perhaps she would have continued this construction-destruction process longer had she not been evicted from her apartment, forcing DeFeo to make the finishing touches at its first storage location—the Pasadena Art Museum—three months past the painting’s removal. Along with the physical appearance, the title experienced its own evolution: from *Deathrose* (c. 1958-64), to *The White Rose* (c. 1965-1968), and finally, to *The Rose* (c.1969-present).

Each stage of completion mimics the way a detonated bomb changes appearance in the sky. At first, given the appropriately morbid and telling title *Deathrose*, the painting’s bright white burst radiating from its center suggests a blinding explosion. The viewpoint from which the spectator witnesses this explosion could either be interpreted as a bird’s eye view positioned directly above the epicenter, or as seen from the ground, with debris rushing across the horizon. Initially, one sees only the burst (c. 1959-60, **fig. 2**); then great clouds rise forth and obstruct the light; at its climax, clouds rim an unearthly luminescence with both parts delivering equal brilliance. Out of this chaos, another polarity emerges: the perceptible differentiation between sensation and tangible substance. Eighteen unevenly spaced light rays emanate outward from a smooth, ordered, purely-colored center and dissolve at the top into a frothy, churning mixture and at the bottom into large pockets of gray matter, like the sky-high dust plumes that choke the atmosphere after a bomb impacts the earth.

An untitled collage (**fig. 3**), consisting of a photographic reproduction of *Deathrose* with a picture of the artist pasted at its center, indicates she may indeed have considered the painting a metaphor for nuclear explosion. She curls her body into a “duck and cover” pose (**fig. 4**), the recommended individual response to a nuclear air-raid attack. The U.S. government made this

information widespread by a civil defense film, which taught children to lie on the ground and to shield their eyes and heads whenever time did not permit evacuation to a shelter. Whether DeFeo intended to allude to this defensive technique is, of course, uncertain, but the pose does appear to be contrived, with the odd torsion of the right leg drawn awkwardly over the left leg and with what seems a deliberate attempt to shield her eyes from the blinding light. By transplanting the “duck and cover” position into *Deathrose*, she gives new meaning to its fetal—and futile—vulnerability. Moreover, her adaptation demonstrates the extent to which atomic culture may have altered the consciousnesses of even those who resisted participation in it.

Unlike the majority of Americans, the California Beat artists did not consume Cold War propaganda passively; rather, they reacted against it. DeFeo’s husband of ten years and fellow painter, Wally Hedrick, made protest art in dissent of missile proliferation and the Vietnam War. Among other likeminded nonconformists of the couple’s social circle, the Beat poets Philip Lamantia and Allen Ginsberg, along with the assemblage artist and filmmaker Bruce Conner, revealed in their writings and artworks fear of nuclear annihilation. Their mutual friend Jess (Collins), who had held a career as a radio-chemist for the Manhattan Project and at the Hanford plutonium-manufacturing site, renounced the profession and committed himself to making art. Together this group of artists constituted part of a small yet dynamic 1950s subculture that historian W. T. Lhamon, Jr. credits with providing an antidote to the Cold War political rhetoric.

That DeFeo never followed the lead of her comrades to speak out about the bomb may be on account of several factors, from a desire to protect her privacy, to social pressures that encouraged women artists to maintain neutrality, to genuine apathy towards politics. Nonetheless, the friendships she formed with Hedrick, Lamantia, Ginsberg, Jess, and Conner called for her intellectual involution, for thoughtful commentary on and comprehension of their work or, at the

least, for attendance at their events. Due to time constraints, I will not present more than a few examples from the Beat oeuvre, but I maintain that the group's diverse and numerous responses to atomic culture and the relentless, penetrating nature of the culture itself affected her work in previously unexplored ways.

Both the Beats' and mainstream Americans' initial responses in the weeks following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki tragedies tended toward fear. Government propaganda, fueled by an aggressive campaign on the part of Manhattan Project scientists, made sure to counteract this mood with promises of atomic products that would enhance the American quality-of-life. Many seemed to buy into such utopian dreams, and even those who did not were more ambivalent bystanders to the whole spectacle, whereas the San Francisco-based "insurgent culture" firmly anticipated the worst: nuclear apocalypse.

Philip Lamantia, a member of the same social circle as DeFeo, shared this apocalyptic vision. As a surrealist poet, he hinted at rather than expressly divulged his fears and filled the pages of his poetry book, *Ekstasis* (1959), with dark vocabulary. Poems such as *The New Evil* contain allusions to nuclear attack, including the phenomenon described in Hersey's *Hiroshima*, whereby the flash fixed shadows of buildings and humans closest to the blast into permanent imprints. Other poems' doomsday imagery—"the liquefaction of the walls of the city," the repetition and capitalization of words like "CLOUDS" and "FIRE"—runs throughout.

A sketch for *The Rose* (**fig. 5**) drawn on an end paper of the *Ekstasis* book shows that Lamantia's evocative language perhaps caused DeFeo to contemplate the painting's design and light effects at the very moment she was reading his poems. The outline of the rapidly executed form resembles the kind of symbol a cartoonist would use to represent an explosion, similar to the shapes in which Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein painted words like "POW!" and "BLAM!". In

actuality, the sketch serves a more mundane purpose: to remind her where to place the highlights and where the rays' ends should taper off. Work on *The Rose* had just gotten underway, and she was anxious to make any changes necessary to see that the form remained true to her vision. If *The New Evil* poem provides any indication of the kind of imagery that prompted her brainstorm, then perhaps *The Rose* originates from a more sinister source than scholars have yet to acknowledge.

In reference to the literary group, curator Lisa Phillips observes, "Much of Beat art and attitudes were informed by visionary experiences." One could also apply this statement to the visual artists. DeFeo's friend Jess Collins, who simply referred to himself as Jess, eventually felt an aversion to atomic culture similar to what she experienced, although his attempt at isolation from it was certainly deliberate. While DeFeo honed her painting talents at Berkeley, Jess helped to produce plutonium for the atomic bomb, first on the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and then on the Hanford Project in Washington. One night that year—1948—Jess had "the dream" that the world would end by 1975. So strong was his premonition that it led him to abandon his vocation as a scientist and to start afresh with a more fulfilling livelihood. Works like *If All the World Were Paper And All the Water Sink* (**fig. 6**) bespeak the haunting effect his past had on the artist, whose silhouetted image in the painting gazes at what appears to be a fiery mushroom cloud.

Nearly ten years after Jess's life-altering incubus, DeFeo drew an image derived from a dream, called *The Eyes* (**fig. 7**), which, notably, she claimed foretold *The Rose*. One interpretation might be that *The Eyes* envision the atomic explosion before it occurs. They capture the moment when the pupils are rendered blank and white by the blinding, instantaneous flash. Rather than turn away from what the prophetess knows will bring certain death, the crystal

ball-like orbs stare forward in a hypnotic or mesmerized state. A poisonous wind of unimaginable force, represented by variously sized vertical lines arranged both behind and in front of the central image, streams across the face and vaporizes every fleshly trace. *The Eyes* belong to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose retinas are burned by the blasting heat, and to those like Jess who intuitively sensed in their atomic nightmares that the days of nuclear genocide were near.

By the time DeFeo completed the laborious *Rose* project, doomsday predictions still loomed in the air, and to make matters worse, she was evicted from her apartment, split with her husband, and separated from her masterpiece, which had been moved into temporary storage. Left abandoned by these comforts in trying times, DeFeo suffered four years of withdrawal. Life without *The Rose*, her outlet for grappling with Cold War anxieties, I would argue, plunged DeFeo hopelessly back into a disheartening global climate.

Following her four year hiatus, *After Image* (**fig. 8**) surfaced as the first remnant left behind by her metaphorical explosion, *The Rose*. Akin to an archeological artifact, the object appears to have passed several years until its discovery after the artist peeled away the protective layer—a translucent sheet of paper—once covering it. Constance Lewallen notices the size of the drawn object, made after a photograph of a shell, matches exactly that of each prophetic eye in *The Eyes*, thus reaffirming the connection between the three pieces. Although by no means the only interpretation, the sequence, nonetheless, could read as follows: *The Eyes* foretell an atomic blast; the actual explosion occurs in *The Rose*; and in its wake, only brittle fragments like *After Image* remain. And like *The Rose*, it could again be linked to *The Eyes*: the vestige of an oculus burned down to the bone. In place of a hollow socket, DeFeo imagines what a skeletal structure of a closed eye, incised by scorching light beams, would look like. Recall that *The*

Eyes began as empty slates—the retinas filled with an overwhelming brightness—that were primed to receive the burst design. Alternatively, *After Image* might signify *The Rose*'s deteriorated form, all shriveled and energy-drained, bearing faint traces of its former essence.

Either interpretation leads to the conclusion that DeFeo felt *The Rose* could no longer provide protection. Whatever it had done in the past to fortify her failed the ultimate test. The painting left her abandoned, broke, and ill; her obsession with it certainly did not help her marriage, and any museum or collector who at first seemed inclined to purchase it would not do so due to conservation-related complications. In a coincidental twist, DeFeo soon afterward experienced effects similar to those associated with radioactive fallout. Toxic levels of chemicals with which she came into contact when painting *The Rose* brought about severe periodontal disease, causing her major tooth loss. She even made several commemorative artworks, like *Crescent Bridge I* (**fig. 9**), that document this peculiar aftermath in a manner akin to *After Image*; when all the dust had settled, the two corporeal relics—bone and enamel—could be counted and studied among the other losses. Her colleague Allen Ginsberg, for one, attributed his baldness to radioactive fallout, and perhaps this would have led him to speculate that DeFeo was a kindred bomb victim who also suffered from such a poisonous exposure.

Before *The Rose*, DeFeo's reactions to the first H-Bomb explosions barely register in her work. Still, they are present, faintly lingering beneath the surface like radioactive contamination. At first glance, *Untitled (tree)* (**fig. 10**) may appear to portray what the title says it signifies. But just as *The Rose* does not picture a rose, nor should one interpret the *Tree* title only in a literal sense. In light of the intensity with which her colleagues engaged with atomic culture, and the broader strained sociopolitical climate, the form might be read as a mushroom cloud. When compared to a recently declassified U.S. Department of Energy photograph depicting a 1951

Nevada Test Site detonation (**fig. 11**), a treetop likened to an atomic fireball and a trunk to a dust column does not seem a stretch at all. In fact, the top portion of the photograph and *Untitled (tree)* are nearly identical. Save for an open sky, DeFeo includes no cues in the painting to indicate the surroundings; therefore, the base could end just beneath the bottom page border, as it would if it were a bark-covered trunk, or extend a mile southward. From the latter perspective, the cap of boiling dust atop the long stem threatens yet transfixes the spectator standing unsafely underneath it.

Another work from the series, also named *Untitled (tree)* (**fig. 12**) yet a thoroughly unconvincing representation of a leaf-bearing plant, spreads horizontally like an umbrella and bubbles at the center. This particular blue-gray coloration lends itself to the ominous mushroom cloud interpretation and invites the viewer to imagine the sky inseparable from the mass, as if encased and swirling inside it. The object may, of course, refer to both a tree and an atomic cloud at once; indeed, what better combination of opposites could there be? By representing the ancient symbol of life (i.e., the “Tree of Life”) as one with the new age sign for death, DeFeo conflates two diametrical extremes into a composite icon.

Thus, one finds a paradox in the mushroom form. Applying not only to the *Tree* series, but seemingly to all the stalk-and-bulb combinations she employed throughout her career, the meaning hinges upon a flexible distinction between creation and destruction. Richard Cándida Smith notes how DeFeo referred to her repetition of concepts and forms as “cycles.” Although at least three relevant examples exist, I show just one from this mushroom cycle, created in 1958—the same year she began *The Rose*. Other scholars note that *Doctor Jazz* (**fig. 13**) has the shape of a phallus, the instrument of human creation; without minimizing this interpretation, I propose the inverted stalk and bulb could also derive from a stringed instrument or a staccato note; or

perhaps the musical inspiration was less direct. An avowed fan of jazz legend Count Basie, DeFeo must have known their 1958 recording *The Complete Atomic Basie: E = MC²* (**fig. 14**). It was the first record cover to bear the mushroom cloud, born from the modern instrument of warfare. The music itself left a lasting impression, for DeFeo listened to one of the band's earlier tunes, "One O'clock Jump," while painting *The Rose*—again, begun at the time of *Atomic Basie's* release and when she made *Doctor Jazz*. It is equally plausible that the mushroom cloud image—present in all its resplendent, though terrible, glory—burrowed deeper into her subconscious each time she took out and put away the vinyl.

Finally, in 1976, a nuclear subject did stick. That year, DeFeo's close friend and so-called "art manager," Bruce Conner, produced a short film entitled *Crossroads*; his cinematic piece paid tribute to the first atomic bomb detonation at Bikini Atoll, whereas her mixed media artwork referenced a nuclear power station located in Pennsylvania. Predating the plant's partial core meltdown by only months, *Three Mile Island, #3* (**fig. 15**) might picture the flow of residual gases through a cooling tower, which they envelop in a haze. While the circular object pictured in *Three Mile Island* looks like a video camera lens, an homage to Conner, it is actually a more mundane thing: a plastic tape dispenser, fabricated through a process of photocopying, drawing, painting, and finally tearing off sections of the paint with the use of chemicals. Apart from their formal value, these techniques modify the object's original state, serving to distance the subject it represents. The bird's eye view with which DeFeo chooses to portray the industrial landscape produces a similar effect. During the Cold War, the aerial perspective was the preferred means by which to view places that were potential targets, both for practical reasons and, as architectural historian Tom Vanderbilt contends, in order to render the very idea of nuclear holocaust acceptable to the eye. Such a remote view transformed the city into a stage, Vanderbilt

writes, “by rendering it not as a human settlement or an organic entity but as a fixed image, an x-rayed set of parameters.” DeFeo had in a similar way made *Three Mile Island* an utterly objectified representation.

All the artworks cited thus far indicate that DeFeo was readily impressionable to atomic culture, but none confront the heart of the matter directly. *Lotus Eater No. I* (**fig. 16**) and *Lotus Eater No. II* (**fig. 17**) may represent DeFeo’s only attempts to capture the bomb, to conquer her fears by processing it in her typically restrained manner. Masking their source so as to simultaneously resemble no single bomb in particular yet all nuclear weapons combined, these forms seem to exhibit certain essential characteristics, such as the two-tone casing, the distinctive warhead cone, and the cylindrical body. Beyond these basics, DeFeo takes refinement to the extreme. She shrinks the bombs’ size, perhaps to reflect the technological advancement trend towards miniaturization; streamlines their usually gradual width decrease into sharply tapered ends; stylizes the contours by ridding the forms of all attachments; and creates polished surfaces, making them look sleek as bullets. Both objects suggest motion through space, in the case of *Lotus Eater I*, at a speed so fast that the metal begins to peel into a neat curl on one side, while a blurred area on the opposite edge simulates the effect of hyper-accelerated vibration. Similarly, *Lotus Eater II* contains a single, scar-like line jutting outside the capsule, as well as the rapidly executed strokes slashing across its surface. Perhaps to emphasize the radioactive contents waiting to burst through, DeFeo bestows upon the bulbous end a luminous halo.

By failing to consider kinetic clues, scholars struggle to identify the *Lotus Eater* form. Their interpretations tend to typify the kind given to Abstract Expressionist art. Stylistically DeFeo may fall under that category, though to speak of her work in the same way as Pollock’s is to ignore the different environment and people from which she culled inspiration. Constance

Lewallen, co-curator of an exhibition in 1996-1997 which featured DeFeo's work, sidesteps the typical pitfall of Abstract Expressionism criticism. In the process, however, she might miss the mark by calling *Lotus Eater* "an amphoralike...vessel," or alternatively, "a headless female torso." Neither assessment explains why the painting alludes to movement through space, nor do they convince the observer that the objects in fact look like those things.

Seeing *The Rose* and other artworks by DeFeo as atomic icons requires little more than empirical skill. In other words, the first questions one must ask are: how does the painting truly appear? Should the artist's resistance to admitting the personal and cultural components in her art preclude viewers from noticing how its immensity, pattern, texture, coloration, and more, all point to the same origin—the bomb? DeFeo intended the painting to provoke a complete experience, to inspire contemplation not of the central image alone, as many scholars tend to do, but rather the aggregate of the parts combined.

Likewise, viewers must recognize the components of her physical surroundings, including bits of the broader world that she kept near. If we imagine her total environment, it is easy to see how the bomb could overwhelm her thoughts at a moment's inattention. As she sits back from her work and smokes a cigarette, for example, the Count Basie dust jacket from which she just pulled the album sits atop the record player. The glowing mushroom cloud picture captures her eye for a split second, reminding her of the *Life* magazine she thumbed through earlier that morning, with its images of nuclear weapons detonations, the latest urban evacuation plan (whose radial highways to safety echo *The Rose*'s hazardous rays), or whatever the day's dismal news may be. Tiring of these thoughts, she picks up the December 18, 1962 issue of *Look* magazine (**fig. 18**). On the cover DeFeo finds a photograph of President John F. Kennedy at his desk, accompanied by the headline "Washington in Crisis...154 Hours That Shook the World:

the Untold Story of Our Plan to Invade Cuba,” and inside, a full-page picture of herself fine-tuning *The Rose*.

Whether or not anything like this scenario ever happened, such sensory overload constituted a fact of Cold War living. DeFeo at once coped with what the average person experienced and ingested the extreme anxieties expressed by her husband and colleagues. For her, atomic culture was magnified by circumstantial occurrences, from liberating social gatherings to everyday private moments; from *The Rose*'s inception and the subsequent illness she endured; to her experiments with other media resulting in profuse references to explosions, mushroom clouds, and death. This is precisely the way in which DeFeo hoped others would understand the work—as extensions of her convoluted imagination and intense physical toil, steeped in the peculiarities of her personal life and career, and yet somehow, in the end, managing to feel deeply universal.