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VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Materiality and atmosphere. Two American beat artists painting Europe

Frida Forsgren*

Abstract: The article discusses how European painting heavily influenced two American Beat painters in the post war years. Post-war American painting was often concerned with breaking away from traditional iconography and style, but Jay DeFeo and Joan Brown chose to engage with European traditional painting. Both artists travelled to Europe early in their careers and both declare an intense interest in European painters, paintings, and architecture. In Brown's case particularly the works of Goya, Velazquez, and Rembrandt become scrutinized and remodeled in her pasty abstract style. De Feo, on her hand, states a particular interest in how the European cities' distinct colors, lights and textures inspired her tactile, gritty painterly style. Both artists were involved in the San Francisco Beat era characterized by an unconventional and anti-establishment attitude. De Feo and Brown's fascination with Europe is thus a radical contribution to Beat culture.

Subjects: Visual Arts; Fine Art; Painting

Keywords: beat culture; beat art; American abstract expressionism; traditional iconography; Jay DeFeo; Joan Brown; European iconography

1. Introduction

After the Second World War the majority of American artists desired to create a completely new artistic idiom based on expression, intuition and non-figuration. Jackson Pollock, for example, declared that modern society could not be expressed in the old form of the Renaissance, thus creating a free-form canon (Doss, 2002, p. 119). But that not all American experimental artists abandoned tradition is a well-known fact. Willem de Kooning for example adopted an abstract style albeit continuing to work with the figure in his *Woman* series. And newer revisionist studies on the Abstract Expressionist movement have discussed the movements «subjects» as Anne C. Chave's study on Mark Rothko (Chave 1989). That figuration is central to the avant-garde position also in Europe we clearly see in movements such as the

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frida Forsgren's research has been centered on two main topics: Italian Renaissance Art (dissertation) and American Beat Culture (*San Francisco Beat Art in Norway, Beat Lives, Out of the Shadows*). The article combines the two interests by focusing on how Beat artists Jay De Feo and Joan Brown turned to European classical culture in several works from the late 1950s and early 1960s.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper discusses two American artists connected to the Beat underground. Beat is normally defined as a literary movement, but several artists were connected to this radical and political underground milieu. Most artists connected to Beat Culture paint in a spontaneous, confessional style similar to jazz and poetry, but this article shows how Jay De Feo and Joan Brown in some works choose a more traditional artistic approach. European iconography and European cities' distinct colors, lights and textures heavily influenced these two artists.

School of London, the School of Paris, and in a mainland figurative artist as Alberto Giacometti. This article focuses on two Post War American artists Jay DeFeo and Joan Brown, and discusses how their work relates to figuration and to Europe. In itself, this fascination with Europe might not seem particularly revolutionary, but in the context of the Californian Beat milieu that Brown and DeFeo worked within between 1955–1965, their choices are radical. The Beat milieu in San Francisco was a highly anti-establishment movement where the impulse to break with tradition and to experiment with open forms was paramount. Joan Brown's turn to classical iconography was thus surprising as pointed out by Karen Tsujimoto: «Given the unconventional tenor of the Beat era when these paintings were created, it is surprising to realize that Brown continued to look to the work of old masters such as Goya, Rembrandt, and Velazquez» (Tsujimoto & Baas., 1998, p. 24). This also applies to Jay DeFeo from the same experimental Beat milieu in San Francisco. As Brown she chose a far more traditional pictorial language than other artists affiliated to the Beat milieu. In this article the signifier «Europe» is addressed from two different points of view: in relation to its Fine Arts tradition (Brown), and through direct experience from its material culture (DeFeo). While Brown's work particularly demonstrates concrete links to European iconography and European painters, DeFeo's work is a direct response to the material *feeling* and *experience* of Europe. The scope of the article is to show that these concepts of Europe played a formative role in DeFeo and Browns work. Furthermore the article proposes to nuance the discussion of the experimental Beat milieu in California, showing that traditional iconography too played a part of this experimental milieu.

2. American abstract art, bay area figuration and beat art

Joan Brown and Jay DeFeo both studied in California in the early 1950s and were introduced to American Abstract Expressionism in its heyday. «At the time we were all dripping», comments Jay DeFeo on the influence exerted by Jackson Pollock, American Abstract Expressionism's most towering figure, on her generation (Oral history interview with Jay DeFeo).¹ Pollock has become the main symbol of this movement's chief characteristics: the spontaneous execution, the fluid movements and the technique of dripping paint onto the canvas. As Pollock had said, after the Second World War there was a need to distance oneself from the traditional artistic language and invent a new artistic idiom based on free form and non-figuration. The surrealist movement, with its stress on open, intuitive processes based on subjective experience, strongly influenced these thoughts. Artists wanted to access what was «inside» rather than «outside», and the technique of automatism was thought to release the inner, unconscious voice. In order to tap these inner resources, artists made use of a high degree of physicality. Artists would pour paint, drip paint and use gestural strokes in order to make forceful tracks on their canvases. The workings of the mind would be released through the body. We may say that the canvas, rather than being a place to explore and experiment with visual signs from the exterior world, became an arena on which to act. Harold Rosenberg described the new picture as «an event» (Hess, 2005). The question of non-objectivity and non-figuration was fundamental to several of these artists. One wished the visual language to reflect a panhuman, democratic and free state devoid of controlling mechanisms such as closed-forms and traditional images. Often artists would avoid titles that would steer and guide the reception of the images: freedom was paramount.

The American Abstract Expressionist School has often been dubbed the New York School since many of its most famous artists worked on the East Coast, but the movement gave a comparably strong impulse to the West Coast. The West Coast painters had a similar stress on automatism, free-form technique and physicality, but tended to be even more explorative in their use of materials. The San Francisco-based movement differs from the New York version in being perhaps «slower, less flashy, and more deeply rooted in nature» as Susan Landauer has shown (Landauer, 1996). And these features are often manifested through a gritty, tactile style (Williams, 2013, pp. 34–38). The close ties with nature and to painted tactility are also manifest in the other dominant artistic style on the West Coast in the post-war years: the Bay Area Figurative group. The painters in this group found their subject matter in landscapes, cityscapes

and the human figure, but were inspired by the free-flowing paint handling of the Abstract Expressionists.² In the 1960s, Joan Brown became a central protagonist in this local figurative movement (Jones, 1990, pp. 145–155).

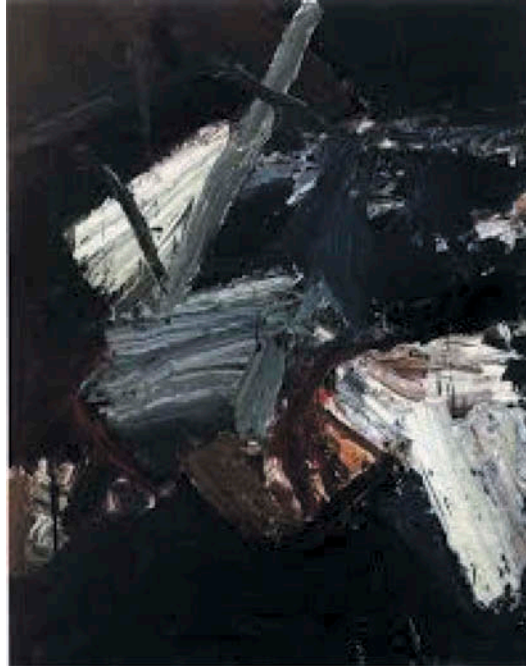
Abstract Expressionism and Bay Area Figuration were styles used by the artists connected to the Beat Generation movement. Beat Art defines visual art made in California between 1958–1965, related to the American Literary Beats' spontaneous, improvised and experimental style. It very often deals with provocative, radical and gritty subjects. As an individual genre, Beat art has received less attention from scholars than Beat literature and poetry.³ One might say that the compartmentalization of Beat culture into separate genres is insufficient, due to its multimodal and experimental nature: painters wrote, poets painted, and musicians accompanied words and images. And paintings were exhibited in venues where poems were performed to jazz. Daniel Belgrad has discussed how spontaneity, improvisation and physicality were central component in Beat aesthetics, stressing the bodily and material qualities of the creative process (Belgrad, 1999).⁴ He has shown how the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, the be-bop solos of Charlie Parker and the prose of Jack Kerouac are inspired by the same creative bodily impulse. There are striking affinities between the Beat writers' free, confessional literary style and the painters' raw improvisations on canvas, as the body of work connected to the Beat generation movement show (Forsgren, 2009). Both DeFeo and Brown are recognized as vital members of the visual Beats in California between 1955–1965 when they worked in the Fillmore district (Solnit, 1990). And Jay DeFeo's monumental painting *The Rose* is seen as the Beat Generation's most important visual work of art (Doss, 2002, p. 119). But even though DeFeo and Brown are placed firmly within the Beat Art movement, their work differs from the work of Beat artists such as Leo Valledor, Keith Sanzenbach, Michael McCracken and George Herms. These differences are articulated in how they relate to traditional iconography, and that they turn to a traditional material as «Europe».

3. Joan Brown: between beat, abstract expressionism and figuration

Joan Brown (1938–1990) was a highly versatile artist whose career ranged from Abstract Expressionism, Funk, Beat, and figuration, public art to spiritual imagery; this article, however, focuses on her early abstract and figurative works and particularly how they were shaped by European culture. Brown graduated from the California School of Art in 1959, the key institution in the western U.S. to advance the ideas of Abstract Expressionism. And in her early work Brown clearly embraced the gesture and force of Abstract Expressionist paint handling and its intuitive approach to the creative process, as we see in her painting *Brambles* from 1957 (Figure 1). It has lush pasty strokes and a web of intersecting lines transmitting energy and pace. The colours are thick and show signs of dripping.

In 1960 and 1961, as she matured as an artist, she switched from abstract works to a marked focus on figurative imagery. These paintings began to incorporate intense colours and dramatic lighting, and are executed with large brush strokes and palette knife. She would also allow paint to drip randomly on various areas of the canvas. Brown describes how she enjoyed the tactility of the paint and the lush colours: “[...] I loved the application as well as the look of the paint, right out of the gallon can. I loved what happened when I was using a trowel, the physical exuberance of just whipping through it with a big, giant brush” (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 62). Her canvases are often dense with paint sometimes as thick as three inches, and her physical application lets us trace the creative process in her work. Thus in her figurative paintings we see how she continued to use the energy and physicality of the Abstract Expressionists even though her subject matter became more figurative, autobiographical and representative of important events in her life. The pasty, spontaneous style is the typical medium of the Beat generation artists, as is underlined by Lisa Philips: “Not only was the content raw and gritty. But so were the form and delivery. Process was stressed; improvisation and spontaneity were paramount” (Philips, 1996, p. 37). Joan Brown clearly *paints like* her American contemporaries, but what about her subject matter? And what about her artistic inspiration? While other painters in the Beat generation declared a desire to break with tradition, Joan Brown, in sharp contrast to her peers, established clear links with the old European heritage, as the following discussion will show. Rather than breaking with tradition, Brown was in dialogue with the old world.

Figure 1. Joan Brown: *Brambles*, 1960.



4. Joan Brown and Europe

Joan Brown discovered European painting by chance. She had never had a profound relationship with the masters of traditional painting, she did not come from a visually sensitive family, nor had she been exposed to traditional iconography at the California School of Fine Arts. The school spirit was to re-invent art. A striking example of this urge for the new and modern was the way Diego Rivera's fresco *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* in the school was actually covered by a curtain in the 1950s so that students would not be exposed to traditional art (Landauer, 1996, p. 35). It was during an illness in which Brown's husband gave her a pile of art books to look through that she became captivated by traditional art. She says that she was "totally blown away" by the shapes and colours of these masters, though the books themselves were bland and not very impressive: "I was just knocked out. I'd never seen any of this stuff, and I felt this tremendous surge of energy" (Jones, 1990, p. 146). In the interview with Paul Karlström for the Archive of American Art, when Brown is asked about her heroes between 1955 and 1960, she answers:

JB: The three main ones—and that is Rembrandt, Goya and Velasquez. And I know what you are asking in terms of contemporary people, but these guys continued, and continue, and still are, the people who I turn to (Joan Brown papers).

As late as in 1975 Brown still stressed that these three were still her favourite painters and had remained so over the years (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 24.). As Karen Tsujimoto pointed out in the passage cited above (p. 1), it is quite exceptional that Brown attributes such a great influence to the old masters, given the experimental, anti-traditional milieu she was in (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 24).

In 1961 Brown got a scholarship that enabled her to travel to Europe and see works by her favourite painters. The journey lasted from July to September and was her first trip to Europe. She spent three months touring Spain, Italy, France, and England, including visits to Cadaqués, Barcelona, Madrid, Granada, Venice, Florence, Rome, Paris, and London. She visited the Louvre in Paris, the Prado in Madrid and a major Rembrandt exhibition at the National Gallery in London. About the artistic input from her trip, Brown again stresses the major influence the old masters Tintoretto, Velazquez, Goya and Rembrandt had on her:

JB: The Prado was it. And then we went to the Louvre. I saw a lot of stuff. I saw Tintoretto's in Italy, and they knocked me out, but nothing like the Prado. Yeah, I bought Tintoretto books. I like Tintoretto, I refer to him in classes, too. We went to the Louvre, and saw a lot of neat stuff there that knocked me out. And there was a Picasso Museum that was in a house which had a lot of those handmaidens he had copied from Velasquez, which were really exciting and tremendously stimulating. But, nothing knocked me out like the stuff in the Prado until we ended up in London. That was the last part of our voyage. We came back from London to San Francisco. And at the National Gallery in London there was a big Rembrandt show, which was an absolute knock out. And that did the same thing to me. It had all the self-portraits, drawings, etchings and paintings. It had some of the best art I've ever seen. (...) (Joan Brown papers, 1955–1974).

And when asked whether this trip had any real impact on her work, Joan Brown answers a definitive “sure” as the flowing interview shows:

PK: Do you think—this is a real art historical question—it had any real impact on your work?

JB: Sure.

PK: On the direction of your work?

JB: Yes, sure. Something like the Rembrandt show I mentioned. There was no middle of the road there. He either knocked himself out or fell on his ass. But he never played it safe.

PK: But less in terms of style, a master, so to speak. But more in terms of a basic philosophy.

JB: Yes. Interior attitudes. Yes.

PK: And a way to work perhaps.

JB: Not a way to work in a physical exterior sense. Not mechanical, but internal kind of process and way to work (Joan Brown papers).

As these comments show, Joan Brown was highly influenced by the traditional European painters that she both studied in reproductions at home in California and looked at in reality during her European trip in 1961. And in contrast to the majority of her contemporary artistic peers she highlights traditional painters as a source of inspiration—but how exactly did this influence manifest itself in her paintings from 1955–1965? Let us look at a few examples to study the impact of Europe on her oeuvre.

5. To embrace and defy tradition

Joan Brown's titles, such as *Flora*, *Gypsy Nativity*, *Abraham's Decision* and *Aida at the Bath*, testify to a close relationship with traditional iconography and motives. Her *Flora* (1961) and *The Day Before the Wedding* (1962) were directly inspired by Rembrandt's paintings of *Flora* (1630s) and *Susannah and the Elders* (1647). *Aida at the Baths* (1961) was directly inspired by her memories of seeing the opera *Aida* at the Roman Baths. *Gypsy Nativity* and *Abraham's Decision* both depart from traditional iconography (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998, pp. 30–52). In addition to these direct translations of traditional iconography, several of Brown's works show an inspiration from motives, lighting, tactile and spatial solutions found in works by Rembrandt, Tintoretto, Goya and Velazquez. But even in the motives directly derived from the old masters, Brown clearly stamps the work with her own personality and style, as we see in her version of Rembrandt's *Flora* (Figure 2). Brown has clearly departed from the version of *Flora* (1634) by Rembrandt showing his wife Saskia van Uylenburgh as the goddess Flora, now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (Figure 3). In Rembrandt's version, Flora stands in left profile. She turns her face, which has Saskia's features, with a slight inclination towards the spectator. In her right hand she holds a staff entwined with flowers diagonally in front of her; she lifts up her long mantle in front with her left hand. Her hair, adorned with a large garland of flowers, falls in long curls down her back. In her ear is a pearl. She wears a dress of gay pattern with loose sleeves, a scarf crossed on her bosom, and a light blue mantle falling from her shoulders. The light, which is evenly distributed, falls from the left. Thick bushes form a dark background. The figure is life size, three-quarter length. Brown's *Flora* is a full-length portrait. Flora occupies the entire right side of the canvas and mimics the exact pose of Rembrandt's version of the scene. But the execution is bold and modern: Joan Brown's paints with broad, energetic strokes and

Figure 2. Joan Brown: *Flora* 1961.

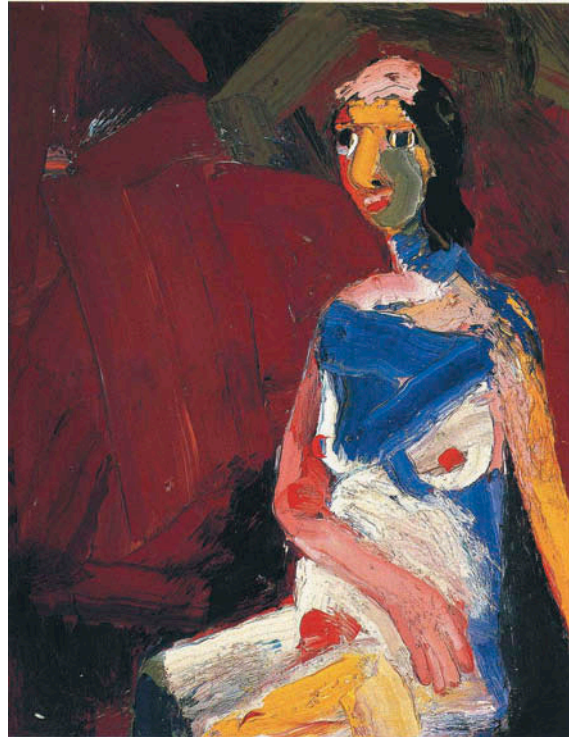


uses strong, clear primary colours: red, blue and yellow attract attention to the scene. The garland of flowers, the flower staff and her mantle are blurred and executed with frenzied speed. A striking difference between the two versions of the scene is how Brown lets Flora meet the viewer's gaze, whereas Rembrandt's *Flora* looks down with a gentle expression. Brown's *Flora* is a fascinating example of how an artist may refer to and show respect towards tradition, but still manage to defy it by introducing her own personal style. The energetic paint-handling and the pasty, tactile style are fully her own. It is tempting to read *Flora* as a self-portrait, since Brown was pregnant with her son Neri. She also stated that *Flora* was the name that she had intended for her child, had it been a girl (Jones, 1990, p.148). And it is also tempting to draw

Figure 3. Rembrandt, *Flora* 1634, Eremitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



Figure 4. Joan Brown, *irl sitting*, 1962, Oakland Museum.

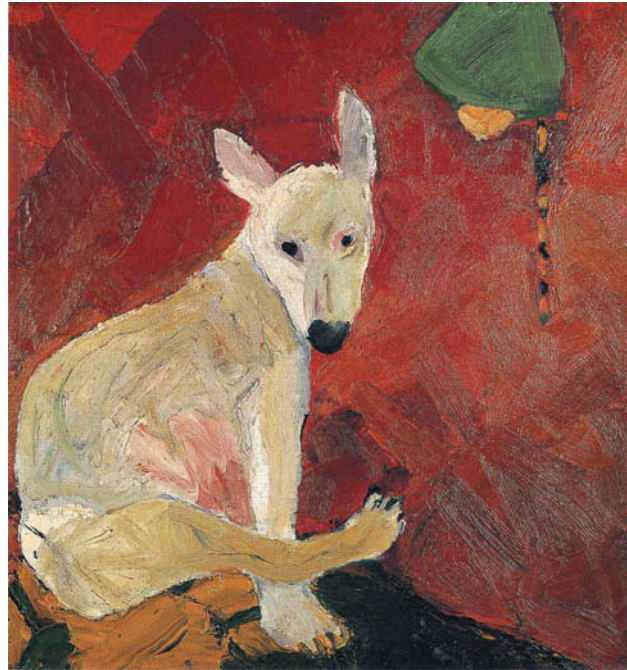


lines between Brown's *Flora* and her later paintings of female nudes *Girl Sitting* (1962) and *Girl in Chair* (1962), where the traditional female figure is painted with voluptuous energy and sensuality (Figure 4). In the later paintings, the woman is not linked to a particular iconography, but seen as a liberated individual free from canonical and stylistic constraints.

In the passage quoted above, Brown stresses how the European influence also manifested itself “[...] more in terms of a basic philosophy” (“Oral history interview with Joan Brown, 1976”). Instead of a direct iconographical similarity, in many instances we see how Brown's work is inspired by motives, lighting, tactile and spatial solutions found in works by Rembrandt, Tintoretto, Goya and Velazquez. Her *Shark Trial part II* (1961) for example plays on a historical courtroom scene by Goya but is given contemporary actuality by reference to a time when Brown and her friends were out swimming (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 45). Brown particularly stresses that she felt that the “light is the most successful it's ever been” (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 45). *Dog and Lady on a Ladder* introduced a vast perspective quite like the chequered floor in Tintoretto's *The Washing of Feet* (1547), but instead of departing from a distinct narrative, Brown lets the empty space between the dog and the women tell a story of isolation and estrangement.

A different example of how a particular motive inspired her is the way Brown engages emotionally with traditional court portraits by Velazquez and Tintoretto. She was particularly fascinated by how the dogs in paintings such as Diego Velazquez' *The Infante Baltasar Carlos as a Hunter* (1635–36) and Tintoretto's *The Washing of Feet* (1547) seemed to exist in a separate dimension and have a life of their own. “This kind of duality, this kind of exchange of the animal nature and the human nature, or the connection and psychic response that the animal picks up from the person, is something that fascinates me” (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 33.). In several of her paintings she works on the theme of dogs and portraits, as in her painting *Portrait of Bob for Bingo* (1960) which shows a close-up of her family dog Bob (Figure 5). Bob is rendered as a character in his own right looking directly at us with a sharp gaze. His body is a bright white with pink tones around his ears and eyes, and he is depicted in front of a messy red background with Brown's

Figure 5. Joan Brown, Portrait of Bob for Bingo 1960.



characteristic thickly-painted strokes. In other paintings such as *Family Portrait* (1960) and *Gypsy Nativity* (1960) Bob is integrated in the painting as a bystander. In these scenes we see how Brown was inspired by a sentiment and feature in the traditional motives that she interpreted and gave a personal meaning to.

In her Beat period Joan Brown famously executed the assemblage *Fur Rat* (1961) that stands as an iconic piece of art produced during the beat period in San Francisco (Figure 6). In the same period she also made a striking sculpture of a bird made of wood, wire, cardboard and ragged bits of fabric. For the legs Brown used electrical cord. Her *Bird* looks like a fragile, swaddled, mummified baby and transmits a feeling of vulnerability and fragility (Figure 7). In reference to Goya's paintings, Brown particularly highlights how she was fascinated by "his squat, sculpted forms" from his *Disaster of War* series (1810–20), and it is tempting to draw parallels between Brown's *Bird* and Goya's mummified, helpless figures (Tsujiimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 24).⁵ She seems to stress a particular sensation that these figures convey, a sensation we may find in her *Bird*. Again this is a striking example of how Brown in her work taps into traditional forms and sensations from older work that she interprets in a new, personal manner.

Figure 6. Joan Brown, *Fur rat*, 1960, University Art Museum, University of Art at Berkeley.



Figure 7. Joan Brown, *Bird* 1961, collection of the artist.



Below we will see how Beat artist Jay DeFeo was inspired by European culture. Her works show clear examples of a direct inspiration from classical iconography and the places visited during her road trip to Europe. And in addition to iconographic references, Jay DeFeo also stresses the impact European materiality and atmosphere made on the development of her visual language.

6. Jay DeFeo on the road in Europe

As was Joan Brown, Jay DeFeo, too, was a versatile artist connected to several different artistic styles in the post-war years. And as with Brown, we may safely place her within the categories of Abstract Expressionism, Funk and Beat art. But unlike Joan Brown, DeFeo never worked within the realm of the Bay Area Figurative style, she was never completely figurative except in her photographs. Jay DeFeo (1929–1989) studied art at the University of California at Berkeley and obtained an MA in painting in 1951. Her teachers were the Hans Hoffman student Erle Loran, the abstract expressionist painter from the East Coast Felix Ruvolo, James McCray, Ward Lockwood, John Haley, the art historians Walter Horn and Mr. Maencken. The only woman on the faculty was Margaret Peterson O'Hagan, who DeFeo recalls as her favourite teacher, (“a terribly important teacher to me because of what she did for me in terms of discipline”). O'Hagan had been a student of Hans Hofmann and Vaclav Vytlacil, and in Paris with André Lhote, and took a great interest in Picasso and Northwest Indian art, thus balancing the impact of abstract expressionism at the Faculty.

In art school, DeFeo's favourite subject was art history. She loved learning about primitive art and particularly Italian Renaissance architecture: the floor plans, the harmony, symmetry and the one-point perspective constructions, as she stresses in this interview with Paul Karlström (PK):

PK: What interested you the most in art history? Was there a period that had a special appeal?

JDF: I was very interested in primitive painting. Also, the notes that I saved specifically were the architectural notes from the Renaissance, from Dr. Horn. The floor plans of the cathedrals, for instance, were very interesting to me, as you might imagine. Although I had no notion then of what it might eventually mean to me.

PK: You were interested in Brunelleschi and Alberti and all the heavies?

JDF: Oh yes! Architecture.

PK: More so than painting?

JDF: More so than painting. Well, it's the architecture that came through heavy to me. The monumentality of the architecture. If you can see the architecture of a culture, you can practically read the culture.

This fascination with European art reaches its culmination in 1952 when DeFeo is awarded the Sigmund Martin Heller Traveling Fellowship that enables her to travel to Europe to see and experience the old world on her own. DeFeo was the first female artist to be awarded this grant and her road trip of some 18 months would prove particularly rewarding for her development as an artist, influencing her topics and visual style.⁶ She departed from New York in September 1951 and during the 18 months her trip lasted she spent time in Paris, London, Spain, Portugal, Morocco and Italy, gathering impressions that definitely stamp her work. When she returned to San Francisco her paintings *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, *Annunciation*, *Veronica* and *Daphne*, clearly attest to DeFeo's direct inspiration from classical iconography. And her *Florence Series*, numbering approximately 200 sketches, and her monumental work *The Rose* are direct references to the impressions Florentine architecture made on her.⁷ In this article, however, I wish to focus on the visual and sensory reflections Jay DeFeo describes upon seeing Europe. Because in addition to the impact made by the churches, architecture, cave paintings and painting exhibitions she visited, she stresses the materiality and atmosphere of Europe as a major influence. Let us look at some of these impressions and observe how this *feeling* of Europe was translated into her painting *Incision* (1958–1960) when she returned to San Francisco (Figure 8).

7. Jay DeFeo and the materiality of the old world

During the three months she spent in Paris, DeFeo paid particular attention not only to the Gothic churches with their impressive stained glass windows but also to the time-worn aspects of the city's buildings and its grey light. In the interview with Paul Karlström she later remarked:

When I got over there to Paris, I was very impressionable about everything. Even just the old crumbly walls—all that kind of stuff. They looked like ready-made abstract expressionist paintings. The old buildings and everything. The whole atmosphere of the town. The grayness impressed me a great deal (Oral history interview with Jay DeFeo).

We note how DeFeo is clearly fascinated by the materiality of the place itself: the walls of the old buildings and how they communicate to her tactile sense. It is of particular interest that she highlights the *grey*ness of the town, a tonality she would return to again and again in her paintings. In her comparison of Paris and California, she explained how the light impressed her:

[...] the atmosphere was so entirely different there. Everything is so vivid and so bright here. I was very taken with this kind of softness—a grayness, a blueness about the atmosphere. And it seems that after Paris, I absolutely responded to that very low key—I could understand how the Impressionists became Impressionists. It struck me as being very much that way (Oral history interview with Jay DeFeo).

Again Jay DeFeo stresses the greyness of the atmosphere and the low light she associates with the Impressionists. And, as she had done with Paris earlier, she also stressed the softness of Florence and its buildings experienced during her six months there:

[...] in contrast to our country there was a lack of garishness there, even in the architecture. There was a mellowness, a worn look. And all of the surfaces that one's eyes encountered. And again I have to get back to that architectural thing. Having studied art history a great deal, but not having seen it first-hand until I got there, I realized how

Figure 8. Jay DeFeo, *incision*, 1958–1969, collection SFMOMA.



entire cities looked like they were part of the terrain. They belonged there. The contrast made me see this country with a whole new perspective in that sense (Oral history interview with Jay DeFeo).

How then are these comments on European materiality and atmosphere reflected in Jay DeFeo's work when she returned home to San Francisco? The passages referred to above document that the very materiality of the cities she visited influenced her immensely. She talks of the "grayness," the "mellowness," the "worn look" and "the surfaces" of the buildings she sees, a materiality she manages to transport into her own abstract expressionist work. Her painting *Incision* is a striking example of DeFeo's style between 1955–1965 and shows similarities to a number of works from the same time (*The Annunciation*, *The Rose*, *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*).

Incision is a monumental structure consisting of oil and string on canvas mounted on a board 299.72 × 141.29 × 23.81 cm in size. It consists of a massive structure of paint distributed with powerful energy, a structure similar to that of a crude rock. Apart from its grandiose size, the most compelling feature of the painting is its painted texture and its greyness. We see how the applied

pigments form lumps, crevices, and structures that make the work look like a sculpture. DeFeo was highly aware of this visual effect and said about her post-European art that it "[...] became more three dimensional in nature, that is, more akin to sculpture, it was like painting a sculpture almost." It is evident that *Incision* resembles the crumbling walls and decaying texture on a micro level. The blotches of paint and the torn look of the canvas surface makes one think of a crumbling wall structure. The painting moves in various chromatic energies from black, dark grey, light grey to white and might be seen as a translation of the "greyness" and "mellowness" that DeFeo encounters in Paris and Florence, albeit reinterpreted in an abstract vocabulary.

DeFeo is highly conscious that it was during her European round tour that she became an abstract expressionist painter: "It was during the Florence period, and it really started in Paris, that I came into my own as an abstract expressionist. Even in this isolated place that really had little bearing on that movement stylistically. I was absorbing my environment but it didn't come out in my own work until much later, when I sort of integrated spontaneous feeling for Abstract Expressionism with something of the refinement of the renaissance period". Here she is painstakingly clear that she sees her Abstract Expressionist works as a logical result of the input she had received on her European travel.

8. Concluding remarks

This article has explored how European culture and tradition significantly shaped Jay DeFeo and Joan Brown, who both travelled to Europe early in their careers. Contrary to most of their Beat Art peers, who desired to break with tradition to create a new artistic language, these artists speak of a deep inspiration from European painters and European culture. They were inspired by European traditional artists such as Velazquez, Goya, Rembrandt, Matisse and Picasso, and also by traditional religious iconography. Moreover, Joan Brown's paintings show a distinct inspiration from certain features and philosophies in classical art that she transferred into her modern artistic vocabulary. Her assemblage *Bird* is a striking example of how a certain sensation from Goya's painted huddled figures is given a modern form. Brown says: "When you transcend the subject matter, it's fascinating. Then you can paint anything: you're able to go through it and past it" (Tsujiimoto & Baas, 1998, p. 44). And this original subject matter was very often found in traditional European art. Jay DeFeo's work, too, frequently finds its inspiration in classical iconography, but also by direct experience with European material culture. She particularly expresses how the sky, the light and the textures of the Mediterranean shaped and sharpened her visual sense. In her *Incision* we note how the features "greyness", "mellowness", "the worn look" and "the surface" are explored in a pasty, abstract style. The artists connected to the Beat underground in California operated in a vast array of styles and techniques, and delivered raw content and personal confessions. The works presented here add to the complex tissue of styles and modes employed by Beat artists in California in the Post War years. The body of work by Jay DeFeo and John Brown illustrate that some artists connected to the experimental Beat scene indeed relied heavily on the past, exploring and adapting traditional genres and forms.

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Notes

1. "Due to all the national publicity, everybody dripped a bit. You know, you couldn't help it. And Felix Ruvolo

of course brought much of this from New York. I mean he had come right out of the New York scene and it was all very romantic, you know. All this jazz and booze and dripping paint and all that sort of thing."

2. On the relationship between the abstract expressionists and the Bay Figurative Artists, Caroline A. Jones states: "Each of the artists came to figuration with a sympathetic understanding of abstraction and a deep enthusiasm for the Abstract Expressionists' achievements; all had received national recognition for their abstract work. Their mature post-abstract figurative paintings preserved a sophisticated dialogue between abstraction and representation – the image oscillating between a recognizable subject and a boldly colored, abstract arrangement of thick slabs of paint." Jones, 1990, p. 1.

3. Thomas Albright in *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area* refers to the visual artists connected to the beat generation as Funk artists (Albright, 1985). Recently, however, the term beat art is a more accepted term. See for instance Forsgren 2008 and Wickizer 2010.
 4. See particularly chapter 4, 7 and 9 where he discusses art works as plastic dialogues and spontaneous subjectivity.
 5. The connection between Goya's figures and Brown's assemblages has also been made in (Aukeman, 2016)** , p. 161.
 6. For a discussion of Jay DeFeo's travel see (Forsgren, 2016)** . For a discussion of Jay DeFeo's inspiration by the classical vocabulary see Forsgren, 2009, pp. 131–141.
 7. "It was during the Florence period, and it really started in Paris, that I came into my own as an abstract expressionist. Even in this isolated place that really had little bearing on that movement stylistically. I was absorbing my environment but it didn't come out in my own work until much later, when I sort of integrated spontaneous feeling for abstract expressionism with something of the refinement of the Renaissance period. If that makes any sense to you. I think *The Rose* demonstrates that quite a bit. It's of the abstract expressionist era but again too it's a very controlled work, a very defined idea, and there's nothing arbitrary about the painting whatsoever." Oral history interview with Jay DeFeo.
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