

Postwar Modern Art and California's Progressive Legacies

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This essay explores mid-twentieth-century cultural and social shifts resulting from California's once-famous commitment to expanding public education. The starting point is how progressive ideologies of education shaped the ambitions of Jay DeFeo (1929–1989), one of the state's most important mid-twentieth-century artists. Three distinct lenses are used: (1) the pedagogical goals of the Department of Art at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1940s, when DeFeo pursued her undergraduate and master's degrees; (2) women's modern art networks that developed around the state throughout the first half of the twentieth century and the models that provided young women like DeFeo with intellectual and creative ambitions; and (3) an examination of what expanded access to higher education meant more generally for a group of young women who graduated with DeFeo from San José High School in 1946. The essay moves between art and social history in order to reveal the correlation of overlapping sets of social relations and the subjective horizons they provided for young adults responding to a complex set of opportunities and limitations. An argument regarding the larger effects of expanding higher education emerges from the juxtaposition of the social, institutional and subjective domains drawn from a narrow slice, a microhistory in effect, of California mid-twentieth-century cultural shifts, some of which took material form in paintings, others in the decisions people made about the most intimate aspects of their lives.

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For the first sixty years of the twentieth century, California's political culture committed the state's resources to building a public education

system second to none, culminating in state-funded college and university programs that were supposed to make quality education accessible to the state's residents. California raced far ahead of the rest of the nation in college enrollments. By 1930, 24 percent of young adults in California attended a university or college, more than twice the national rate. College attendance continued to climb faster in the state than anywhere else in the world, and in 1960, the year California's Master Plan for Higher Education systematized sixty years of decisions, 55 percent of adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one were enrolled in an accredited institution of higher education.

John Aubrey Douglass, the author of the most detailed study of higher education policy-making in California, identified three goals adopted early in the twentieth century that were distinctive for the time. First, *every* high school graduate should be able to continue his or her education; second, public rather than private universities were needed to meet the goal; third, as public agencies, state universities and colleges were best positioned to link research and teaching to the social and economic needs of the state (Douglass 2000, pp. 1–11, 81–113; Kerr 2003, pp. 4–10, 17–22). Through prosperity and depression, the state government continued allocating massive amounts of money to constructing a system of public universities and community colleges that were inexpensive, accessible and overall of high quality. It was a remarkably successful social experiment that contributed to the state's preeminence in the sciences, new technologies, and post-Second World War defense and aerospace industries. The coordinated system of 'universal higher education' was inseparable from California's development into an important hub within the global economy.

This essay discusses the influence of the state's liberal public education policies on the explosion in cultural creativity that occurred in California after the Second World War. I focus on painting, though comparable developments in theater, film, music and creative writing would be needed to construct a full picture of how expansion of university education broadly reshaped the arts in California and the United States. The promotion of a highly skilled workforce was one of the explicit goals of state policy, but utilitarian justifications were not in conflict with more intangible goals of fostering a well-educated citizenry demanding and enjoying a higher level of culture. I will draw from a longer study of abstract painter Jay DeFeo (1929–1989), one of the state's most important mid-twentieth-century artists, to explore how progressive ideologies of education shaped the project of one painter, and then what her experience might reveal about the opportunities, dilemmas and frustrations of the generation that came of age

in the years following the Second World War. I will use three distinct lenses: first, the pedagogical goals of the Department of Art at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1940s, when DeFeo was pursuing her undergraduate and master's degrees; second, women's modern art networks that developed around the state throughout the first half of the twentieth century and the models they provided young women like DeFeo who wanted recognition as productive intellectuals with something of value to say to others; and third, an examination of what expanded access to higher education meant more generally for a group of young women who graduated with DeFeo from San José High School in 1946. The essay moves from art to social history in order to reveal the correlation of overlapping sets of social relations and the subjective horizons they provided for young adults responding to a complex set of opportunities and limitations. An argument about the larger effects of expanding higher education emerges from the juxtaposition of the social, institutional and subjective domains.

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DeFeo grew up in San José, California, raised by a single mother who worked as a nurse while running a boarding home for young women attending San José State College. When DeFeo graduated from high school, she already knew she was going to be an artist, and she enrolled in Berkeley as an art major. She earned her BA in 1950 and her MA one year later. On completing her master's studies, she won a fellowship from the university that allowed her to live in Europe for over a year. After returning home in 1953, she spent the rest of her life in California. From 1955 to 1965, she was at the center of San Francisco's emerging counterculture. She was the secretary-treasurer of the Six Gallery, the most successful of the coop art galleries. Her husband, Wally Hedrick, also a painter, was the gallery's director. Their home in the Upper Fillmore neighborhood was the gathering place for the many artists, poets, musicians and alternative filmmakers living in or passing through California.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, DeFeo flashed onto the national public scene as an emerging artist of notable ambition and talent. Her reputation was, and has remained, largely associated with one painting, *The Rose*, a work that occupied her for eight years, from 1958 to 1966. Her continual reworking of the painting contributed to the sheer mass of *The Rose*, a feature central to the painting's legend and notoriety. The 10- by 8-foot painting weighed nearly 2500 pounds and its three-dimensional form contributes to the feeling that the painting captures a mysterious something emerging out of literal nothingness (Levy and Green 2003; for photographs

of DeFeo working on *The Rose*, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_DeFeo, <http://www.jaydefeo.org/reviews.html>, and <http://www.newyorkartworld.com/reviews/defeo.html>).

In 1959, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City included her in its now famous ‘Sixteen Americans’ exhibition, presenting young artists that curator Dorothy Miller believed best showed the future of painting in the United States after abstract expressionism. DeFeo, her husband Hedrick and a painter from Los Angeles were the only artists selected who lived and worked outside New York. Through the early 1960s, critics often spoke of her as among the very best of the emergent generation, and her work was published in a number of mass-circulation magazines, most prominently in *Look* magazine in December 1962, when DeFeo’s still in-progress *The Rose* was highlighted in an article signed by President Kennedy on important new trends in American visual culture. Interviews with other artists, on both coasts, consistently show that her peers had a high regard for her work. Her work matched the bravado of her male abstract expressionist predecessors in the ambition of its scope and its drive toward absolute painting. By the end of the decade, however, she withdrew from public view, determining that her goals were best served by working without worrying about how to publicize herself. She continued painting and exhibiting while teaching, first at Sonoma State University and then at Mills College. Her reputation remained sufficiently alive that she attracted students from all over the world to work with her in the MFA art program. Since her death in 1989, her reputation has had a considerable renaissance, with an impressive number of exhibitions featuring her contribution to the history of painting in the United States.

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DeFeo frequently noted that her education in the art department at UC Berkeley shaped every aspect of her work, but the training she received placed her and her fellow students outside the mainstream of mid-twentieth-century American abstraction. The Department of Art at UC Berkeley was founded in 1923, at a time when only a few colleges and universities had formal academic programs in studio art (Singerman 1999, pp. 12–16, 19–22). Previously courses in freehand and mechanical drawing had been offered in architecture and engineering. In its initial phases, art practice on campus was either a recreational elective or a technical course in skills useful for illustration of machinery or geological strata. Art classes emphasized techniques for rendering visual evidence clearer. Even after the department was formed, the campus’s Academic

Senate, responsible for maintaining the integrity and quality of academic programs, remained skeptical as to whether art education should be offered at all at a university. For the first fifteen years of its existence, the department struggled through an identity crisis as internal divisions and external doubts undermined the ability of the faculty to develop a coherent curriculum.

Resolution of the department's problems began in 1938 when Stephen C. Pepper, a professor in the philosophy department whose specialty was aesthetics and the bases of criticism, was appointed chair of the art department. Pepper wholeheartedly endorsed Professor Worth Ryder's proposal for a 'balanced art program in higher education'. Ryder's program emphasized a rigorous analytic approach to studio practice that gave students practical skills for the rendering of line, shape, tonality and color, but these technical skills were to be imbued with modern critical theory and a comprehensive survey of art history. With Pepper's backing, Ryder wound up hiring the majority of the studio art faculty and securing tenure for junior professors such as Margaret Peterson who shared his modernist perspective regarding the intellectual functions of art (Stadtman 1968, p. 79; Pepper 1963, pp. 163–172).

Ryder's approach to visual learning addressed demands from other departments—faculty from the science departments most insistently—that art training provide measurable practical skills, but he did so on a basis of principles affirming that art was a credible field of research and not simply a set of techniques. Ryder's approach loosely derived from Hans Hofmann, who had taught briefly at Berkeley in 1930 and 1931. Hofmann had been a mentor for several of the faculty, and his international reputation provided an effective validation for the reforms that Ryder and Pepper presented to the faculty. Developing a grammar of visual structure was the central tenet of the Hofmann method.

By 1946 when DeFeo enrolled, the Berkeley art department had become nationally recognized for its model of art education. The department competed for top ranking in art programs with the departments at the University of Iowa, led by art historian Professor William Longman, and at Yale University, where Josef Albers had founded a program modeled after the Bauhaus. The three most important university-based art programs were very different but the philosophies at each school were equally at odds with the turn towards abstract expressionism and pure imaginative form coming at the very moment to dominate New York art galleries (Pepper 1963, p. 252).

To gain a sense of what students learned at Berkeley, we can turn to Worth Ryder's lectures for his Art 2A course from the Spring 1946 term,

the foundation class required of all majors. Ryder began by informing the class that although he was a modernist, he insisted that the approach to abstraction had to be made through first learning how to render the objective world with a basic vocabulary of design and composition elements. Students went through a progression of eight graded exercises that trained them to think about mark, form and line as the basic building blocks which they combined to make a statement.

For the initial exercises, students worked from a still life in the studio classroom. They divided sheets of notebook paper into four sections and in each square arranged a group of abstract shapes they synthesized from the still life. The first group had to be horizontal in orientation, followed by a second group of vertical shapes, and a third group in which vertical and horizontal shapes overlapped. Ryder limited his students to the use of line only as they started out. Having abstracted the still life in three highly artificial exercises, students were then to arrange a composition with the shapes they had developed. The objective, he stated, was 'Practice in visualizing significant shapes and arranging or composing them in a particular format'.

Further exercises introduced students to texture, shade, volume and scale. They then went outside on campus to repeat the same set of exercises by taking details from the exterior environment, such as a 'trunk of palm tree, vines on masonry wall, small round leaves found on a hedge, bushes, stems, and branches, tree branches without leaves, tree leaves, a variety of trees and leaves'. Having abstracted what they saw into flat, two-dimensional figures, they were then to compose a series of designs with and without overlapping of the shapes. The stated objective was 'Practice in isolating form shapes in landscape and in grasping their color character and texture patterns. Also to compose in planimetric space'.

In the final project, students were to create a composition of humans in motion in an environment, systematically built up through the same, exact series of exercises students had done throughout the term. Ryder's observations on the course suggest that he was not happy with his students: 'Projects could be speeded up. The rascals loafed the minute I let up the whip'.¹

Ryder set up his classes to arrive at what he hoped would be an inescapable conclusion: only by turning to nature could artists ensure that they had real content that would speak to their viewers directly. By exploring objects of a universally shared perceptual process, artists would ask people to consider how they respond to the phenomenal world surrounding them. 'Every act in the creation of form originates in some experience with Nature no matter if the artist works directly from Nature

or in looser contact with it from the imagination. Every experience is a space experience and at the same time a time experience... [developing] through this transmutation process' of sensory data into ideas, which he defined as sensations structured into culturally or psychologically meaningful patterns (Worth Ryder, 'On Conventions and a Symbolic Art' [undated], in Worth Ryder papers). Art training was to free the apprentice artist and students from other departments seeking to broaden their understanding of the world to see what made the visible intelligible. At a time when surrealism was a powerful force acting on many American writers and painters, Ryder insisted that his students not represent their fantasies but look at the world and compare their responses and interpretations (Ryder, 'Dynamics of Picture Surface', notes for Art 173 Aug 12 1938, Worth Ryder papers).

For Ryder, the founding father of modern art was Paul Cézanne, the only recent painter truly comparable in importance and value to the old masters. 'Through him we know again what a spatial conception is; what picture structure is; what form is; what color is; etc. Through him we know that to change the color of a body is to corrupt the structure. His work proves absolutely, *that the art of painting is not any longer the art of imitating an object with lines and colors, but provides us with a plastic conscience for our instinct*' (Worth Ryder, Lecture on Cubism [undated, lecture 14 for Art 173], Worth Ryder papers). The curriculum diminished the importance of the impressionists and Cézanne's contemporaries van Gogh and Gauguin. They had sought to create effects that startled viewers but had lost control of visual structure. Ryder and his colleagues praised the cubists for their structural precision but deplored the weakness of their painting technique. The department's faculty vehemently attacked the surrealists for their emphasis on startling subjective material. Abstract expressionism was seldom discussed in class, and when it was, the department's conclusion was that the new painting coming out of New York was superficial and shoddy. In short, the department gave its students an eccentric history of modern art antithetical to the most important trends in US painting in the middle of the twentieth century.

Erle Loran's course on Cézanne's compositional techniques was required for all students, while Loran's book *Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs*, first published in 1943, was the art department's Bible (Loran 1943). In 1927, Loran lived and worked in Cézanne's studio outside Aix-en-Provence. He took a camera with him to photograph the original scenes of Cézanne's most famous paintings, and the book proceeds through a careful analysis of

Cézanne's reshaping of the scene to create imaginary spatial forms on two-dimensional, colored surfaces.

The prime formal lesson was to bring images back to the picture plane, 'the flat surface of the painting defined by the two dimensions of the frame, height and width'. Imaginary depth suggested on the picture plane comprises the 'negative space' of a painting, while a 'negative shape' was the ground upon which identifiable shapes were placed. Movement into negative space created the emotional rhythms of a painting, but the unity of the work required always returning the eye to the picture plane. Space relations depended on the use of color as the instrument for creating 'an inner light that emanates from the color relations in the picture itself, without regard for the mere copying of realistic effects of light and shade. The color always remains two-dimensional; it lights up the picture plane' (Loran 1943, p. 29).

Loran was proud that what Berkeley had to offer was a procedure that was at once technical and psychological: 'You put down flat and open areas of color', he stated in an interview. An open area suggested but did not define a shape. 'So that the total picture, when most all of the color is laid out in simple, flat areas, the whole thing is unified with the picture plane' (Loran 1981, p. 73). The Berkeley school was not interested in form for its own sake. A painting was a theater for the dramatic display of an artist's response to the world within which she lived. Loran recalled Hans Hofmann's stern advice that 'everything has to come from nature, otherwise you just defeat yourself into style. That's what he said to Pollock...when he first started doing the dripping' (Loran 1981, p. 80). The world that emerged through the intelligent interpretations of the creative mind was more deeply real, more enduring, more valid than the world of casual appearances and independent of the whims of fashion and style. Painting was a technique without equal for revealing the fundamental conditions of consciousness.²

Ryder told his students, 'we are learning a vocabulary and it is easier for you and for me to come to a common ground of understanding concerning the meaning of symbols if the shapes we talk about are crystal clear shapes and shapes confronting both of us, rather than nebulous somethings, highly personal to you perhaps, but unclear and unconvincing to me'. Ryder defined shapes extracted from the still lifes and campus scenes he posed for his students as 'objective' forms, that is as derived from an external reality. The subjective element effected through the placement of these shapes into compositions made the object part of consciousness, a force that emerged through engagement of mind with the world. The painter discovered herself through understanding the objects that surrounded her.

He elaborated: 'A thought is nothing until it is a *formed* thought . . . Form creation in the space arts has to do with the sense of sight and the motor senses, with visual and kinesthetic sensations. My job as teacher . . . is to help you to restore contact with these sensations, to assist you to see clearer and to see more' (Worth Ryder, 'To a Class of Students in Drawing', Art 2A Spring 1946, Worth Ryder papers).

When students thought they were faithfully reproducing a scene, he would demonstrate that they simply mimicked a favorite style and were inevitably doing so sentimentally rather than intelligently. To break away from style, they had to retrain their vision to be analytic. They had to see the basic forms that were the foundations of all styles, be they idealist, naturalistic, surrealist or totally abstract. '*The living of an experience [is] the process of form creation*', he insisted. The end result was self-knowledge carefully gained through study and practice, fitting well into a relatively conventional humanist project maintained in the democratic university as a place where the entirety of human knowledge is made available for reflection to all who momentarily stand apart from the everyday world (Worth Ryder, Notes for Spring 1948 course, Worth Ryder papers).

Margaret Peterson was one of the most popular and influential of the teachers at Berkeley (for examples of Peterson's work see http://aggv.bc.ca/mansion-madness/artist_m_peterson_klukwan.html and http://aggv.bc.ca/mansion-madness/artist_m_peterson_stormgods.html). Peterson followed the Ryder curriculum in setting up a series of still-life exercises that students all worked on. She stressed the use of color, and many of her assignments were intended to deepen students' understanding of primary colors and their relation to each other. Fred Martin, one of DeFeo's fellow students, recalled that Peterson did not permit her students to mix colors. She wanted them to understand the value of each pigment as it came directly from the tube. Students had to select thirty colors, cover a sheet of paper with each other and then insert shapes made from the other colors. Subsequent exercises explored how variations in hue, value and saturation transformed the effects. Her lectures focused on the transmutation of pure sensation into meaning (Martin 1989, 2005; Adams 2004).

Peterson taught at Berkeley from 1929 to 1950, when she resigned her faculty appointment to protest the regent's cold-war-era loyalty oath (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 1973; Rubenstein 1982, p. 216; Therrien 1988).³ Peterson was an imposing personality, and she provided an example for women of how to survive as a professional in a male-defined environment. Striding into class with red-and-white polka-dot high heels,

a hot-pink blouse with a plunging neckline and a tailored skirt, she was an elegantly feminine presence that was also ambitious and intellectual.⁴ She was concerned that students develop the right attitude to the challenge of being a creative thinker. The only book she assigned her students was a biography of Marie Curie so they could understand the general laws of creative thought and the sacrifice required to discover the hidden truths of existence (Adams 2004).

Peterson emphasized that modern art provided a controllable imitation of sacred experience. Modern artists should aim to reveal the sources of awe that people felt before various aspects of their environment and make it possible to reflect on and hence control the factors that stimulated these responses. Gaining control over the relation of idea, emotion and belief was the nub and the essence of modern creative process. When studying art traditions, be they Native American, Byzantine or European, there need be no effort to learn the inner meaning cultures assigned to forms. Like Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, Peterson took particular interest in the art of Pacific Northwest Coast Native Americans. Her most successful paintings worked with visual forms borrowed from this tradition but she divorced the forms from the specific myths they embodied. The painter worked, she thought, to isolate the ultimate source of the emotional effects archaic symbols evoked by establishing the logical relationships that brought form into being. That accomplished, a painter had revealed for all to see the rhetorical structures within which societies encased the experience of form.

The pedagogical method at Berkeley was ‘stodgy’, DeFeo conceded. As in the accounts of their training left by many of her fellow students, Fred Martin, Pat Adams, Sam Francis, Robert Colescott, Sonya Rapoport, she looked back on her education with a combination of rebellion and respect. The department had ignored all contemporary developments in art except to deprecate them, and students went out into the world unfamiliar with the problems that galleries, museums and art journals considered current. Nonetheless, DeFeo and her peers defended their training. Berkeley had taught them to think about visual structure in a systematic way, to understand the vocabulary and the grammars that allowed painting to communicate. Berkeley had taught them, as well, how to imagine themselves within a tradition of painting that extended from the ancient caves at Lascaux to the present, and then to relate the European tradition to parallel developments in Asia, Africa and the Americas (DeFeo 1976, pp. 3, 14–17). Only a handful of its graduates achieved international reputations. Students from the program, however, took faculty positions in new art departments springing up all across the United States. The program was not

successful in preparing students for the commercial gallery scene rapidly developing in Manhattan but it effectively prepared artists to take their place in the research university, ultimately a more secure, stable foundation for art practice.

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Margaret Peterson was a mentor for many students, men and women alike. DeFeo, Sam Francis and Robert Colescott were probably her three students who achieved the broadest international reputations, but Peterson had many other students who established successful careers and who have affirmed the importance of her classes for their subsequent work. Peterson's ability to imbue many of the most important of Californian postwar painters with her philosophical and technical perspectives is indicative of another aspect of the state's progressive if provincial cultural life in the first half of the twentieth century. Women had achieved a modicum of professional success in painting and sculpture, building on a long history of participation in the arts.

Susan Landauer has noted that the institution of new arts organizations in nineteenth-century California coincided with emerging middle-class ideas on the special role women had in culture and education. Women were admitted to California's first art academy when it opened in 1874. Indeed women were a majority of the students of the first class at the school. It was the first school in the nation to allow women to work from the live nude, a practice prohibited not only in Philadelphia and New York but in Paris as well until the end of the century. Landauer also notes local claims that the first all-woman art exhibition anywhere in the world took place in San Francisco in 1885, an event that local newspapers ballyhooed as a sign of the state's progressive development vis-à-vis the rest of the world. At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, half the artists selected for the California art gallery were women. No other state had anywhere near that level of female participation in their art exhibits, and indeed California was the only state to have its own art pavilion (Landauer 1995, pp. 10–11). By the beginning of the twentieth century, women had found regular employment teaching in art departments and art schools in the state. They occupied curatorial roles in galleries and museums, and their ranks eventually included the founding director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Grace McCann Morley, who held the position from the 1930s until her retirement in 1956.

Women who achieved success formed a network extending far beyond universities and museums. Women artists were more likely to work as

teachers in primary and secondary schools. Jay DeFeo's high school art teacher Lena Emery, active in the San José Modern Art Society, identified DeFeo as a potentially talented artist and instilled in her both confidence and conviction that an art career need not be considered frivolous. Emery helped her with her application to Berkeley and continued to give advice to DeFeo for many years after she graduated from high school. In one letter to DeFeo, Emery remonstrated with her for spending too much time socializing and not enough time at the canvas. 'Remember, only art can make you a god!' she wrote to her protégée in language echoing Peterson's convictions (undated letter *c.* early 1950s, Emery to DeFeo, in Jay DeFeo papers, Bancroft Library).

In Stockton, California, Ruth McElhaney worked at the Haggin Museum, teaching children's art classes and organizing local art fairs. She identified Pat Adams, DeFeo's friend and classmate at Berkeley, as another young girl with exceptional potential. McElhaney developed Adams's skills and then shepherded her into Berkeley. Dorothy Miller, an influential curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, took a personal interest in the careers of both young artists, helping them by purchasing their work for MOMA and providing advice on jobs and galleries (Pat Adams papers; Adams 2004).⁵

An informal network of women in the arts connected young girls in out-of-the-way towns to professionals at every level of the art world. They provided the extra help that young artists need to develop self-confidence. Female modernists like Peterson insisted that art transcended gender though society did not. Peterson refused to exhibit in women-only shows, and she made life rough for sorority girls who took her classes to develop social instead of professional skills. Older women had a responsibility to provide tough-minded role models for how to be a progressive, modern artist.

That responsibility included claiming the right to define modern art despite the marginal position occupied as women and as Californians. Women modernists in California were convinced that they were innovators synthesizing a cosmopolitan understanding of contemporary global culture—indeed perhaps better than colleagues and competitors in other parts of the nation.⁶ The struggle over the nature of art curricula was of immediate relevance to them for modern art established their credentials as serious, autonomous intellectuals.

Women taught on almost all the state's college-level art programs, but the UCLA art department was unusual in its having been founded and led by women for its first thirty years, an accidental result of UCLA developing out of the Los Angeles Normal School, a teacher-training institution.

In her oral history, Annita Delano, on the faculty at UCLA from 1920 until her retirement in 1961, wanted to discuss her rebellion against conceptions of art that the state board of education mandated be taught to primary and secondary school teachers. Teacher training in art at that time was based on methods developed by Arthur Wesley Dow, specialist in art education at Teachers College, Columbia University (on Dow's place in US art education, see Singerman 1999, pp. 109–112).

As Delano put it: Dow provided teachers with six 'oversimplified' concepts: proportion, symmetry, rhythm, subordination, opposition and transition. The Dow method was appropriate, in her words, 'to help people in their houses and, say, with textile design and so on, design was the big word...and these principles helped you there'. But at a big price, for Delano believed that the method squelched the creative roles of intelligence, imagination and experience. *Modern* art started with line, space, color, light—that is, experience in need of structure—but the Dow method started with a priori principles (Delano 1976, p. 54).

Delano found the Dow method personally obnoxious because the educational system presumed that women had a good sense of design but lacked real imagination. She was useful for training the masses in basic principles of visual literacy but for nothing more ambitious. Modern art provided an alternative role model and alternative practices. But within the demands of progressive public education aiming to raise the practical intelligence of the citizenry, Delano could not simply pose an ethic of individual creativity, as her nonacademic male counterparts might. She could defend her position within a professional academic environment by going one step further than Worth Ryder and insisting that modern art was vital for any research into the relation of perception and cognition (Delano 1976, p. 122).

Margaret Peterson's focus on the transformation of sensation into meaning was consistent with Delano's definition of 'modern art'. Peterson added that modern art provided a controllable imitation of sacred experience. Modern artists should aim to reveal the sources of awe that people felt before various aspects of their environment and make it possible to reflect on and hence control the factors that stimulated these responses. Gaining control over the relation of idea, emotion and belief was the nub and the essence of modern creative process. The painter worked with the ultimate source of the emotional effect by establishing the logical relationships that brought form into being (DeFeo 1976, p. 12; Adams 2004; Martin 2005). When images escaped preconception, DeFeo told her classes at Mills College decades later, the mind entered a 'new reality' and gained the capacity to think critically about its environment (DeFeo 1988).

There was never any question that women entered the art world on any basis of equality. DeFeo's success was no exception. Women painters faced more clearly the brutal fact that few artists, male or female, achieved the fullness of their ideal. This could heighten competition between women painters who worried with some reason that only a limited number of women could be found interesting at any given time. Reputedly Sonia Gechtoff, on hearing that DeFeo was to be included in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art, contacted the curator to insist angrily that DeFeo had stolen all her ideas from Gechtoff (episode recounted in Pat Adams journals, 5 February 1987, Adams papers).

Limitation, however, could also encourage a sense of responsibility to help others. DeFeo's high school art teacher wrote to her former student explaining why she would remain ready to help in any way she could as long as she could. 'I am too highly keyed to endure all that seems my lot', she continued. 'It is queer to realize that I have a life time of plans and things to do that I want to do, but that I must stop to eat, to sleep, to die before much more life goes by, and when I am gone time continues—*endlessly*, and there will scarcely be a sense of my having been although here and there are threads of love that endure' (Emery to DeFeo, 27 July 1965, DeFeo papers, Bancroft Library). Explaining why it had been important to her own life to provide Jay with money when it could mean the difference between working or not, Mrs Emery confessed, 'To do a little bit for you makes me feel that there is some measure of eternity in effort. There is so little in what I do' (Emery to DeFeo, undated, DeFeo papers, Bancroft Library).

DeFeo's stepmother, once a ballet dancer, acknowledged the same limitations as central to her life, as well: 'It was good to hear from you and to know that you are doing much in your field of creative art. Congratulations. It seems that it takes a lifetime to be appreciated—especially in art. The years go by so quickly, sometimes I feel that my life is going by too quickly, and I haven't done many of the things that I had hoped to do. Now I feel I'm getting past an age when I'll ever be able to fulfill some of the dreams I once had. I guess I'll have to live vicariously through you and the rest of the children and grandchildren. Your triumphs will have to be ours. Yes?' (Dorothy De Feo to Jay DeFeo, 2 October 1979, DeFeo papers, Bancroft Library).

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At San José High School, DeFeo belonged to a campus clique known as the Quad Girls, so called because they kept control of the benches in the center

of the school's quad. A review of school yearbooks and interviews with more than a dozen women from the class of 1946 underscored the diversity of students at San José High—largely a mixture of Italian, Mexican, Armenian, Portuguese and Japanese backgrounds—and provided evidence for an apparently comfortable and extensive social interaction they had with each other, a picture that did not and does not conform to contemporary understanding of race relations in 1940s America. Much of what DeFeo's high school friends had to say provided evidence for shifts in personal expectations that many in their generation at other schools across the state must also have experienced, shifts that themselves may be marked in one form in the creative choices DeFeo made in her creative work.

Every single one of the Quad Girls went to college—Berkeley or San José State University; Stanford was not an option for these women, given their family backgrounds. Every one developed a professional career—in education, in public administration, in healthcare, in real estate—or started a successful small business venture. The Quad Girls grew up, they said without exception, expecting to be self-sufficient economically and able to contribute something of value to society. Their parents conveyed this to them, and so did their teachers. Four male classmates reported that they too had expected that the women they married would be competent, independent people. Both men and women understood that the options open to them were far greater than their parents had experienced. There was a common worry that their grandchildren faced a world that was shrinking again and that life was much more difficult for them than it had been for the previous two generations. Looking back on the insouciant optimism of their youth, a common refrain was, 'We were all so naïve!'

Their accounts reflect a change in personal expectations resulting from the large investments the state of California had started making in public education earlier in the century. More than half of the graduating class of 1946 at San José High School went on to college, an astonishing figure triple the national average. San José High was not an elite school, suggesting that at this point in some communities in the United States multiracial urban schools did succeed in instilling ambition for higher education and the upward social mobility advanced training would allow. Equally important is that these schools developed the self-confidence of the students in their own personal competence.

A cultural revolution was put in motion with the state's commitment to expanded public higher education that rippled throughout the population, encouraging even students from racial and ethnic groups occupying low-status rungs in the state's social hierarchy. DeFeo's generation was the first to grow up in California with the expectation that if you were talented,

college was a normal part of life. Whether that training was to produce an enlightened citizenry or a more highly skilled workforce remains an open-ended question. In addition to the expansion of job opportunities in fields that paid well, the experiment had profound implications for what the state's residents imagined they might—or should—do with their lives.

DeFeo's goal was to be a painter, and her high school friends reported that they expected her to succeed. Through the years, she invited these friends to her shows, and they often went. She usually had lunch with each of them at least once a year. Self-described as 'conventional', they nonetheless took it for granted that good contemporary art would have to be abstract. Representational art was simply 'corny'. They spoke of taking the train to San Francisco while they were in high school or college to visit the modern art museum, which they liked better than the De Young Museum of Art with its old masters. Many of them associated their preference for abstract painting with their *love* for jazz.

These young women were raised in a relatively permissive environment. Boys and girls went off for unchaperoned weekend excursions to Santa Cruz, a nearby beach resort, and their parents encouraged them to get out and have fun. All married shortly before or after graduating from college, all started families in their early twenties. DeFeo's first marriage at the age of twenty-five was indeed the last in the cohort. Her decision not to have children was not surprising to her friends. Her closest friend thought DeFeo's choice was responsible. When she was teaching she was painting, Barbara continued, when she was with somebody she was painting, she was always working on a painting, and a child could not grow up always being second to a painting, she thought.

As the group continued to see each other past college, the main topics of discussion over the years were not surprisingly men, family demands, jobs and health—topics about sources of pain and torment, not of joy. Fully 50 percent of the women in the group divorced their first husbands, DeFeo among them. In each and every account, however, whether young love led to divorce or not, marital difficulties had involved reconciling contradictory expectations that both men and women shared. On the one hand, wives were to be self-reliant, independent women *and* on the other hand, dedicated, efficient homemakers. Among this group, in *each* case, the solution reinforced the importance of women having careers, of women being able to take care of themselves and their children if they had to.

Since DeFeo was an artist, her high school friends turned to her for fashion advice. Indeed through the 1950s she supported herself by making

clothes and jewelry, and the latter would provide objects of study for later work (for a photograph of DeFeo wearing clothes that she designed while a student at Berkeley, see <http://www.jaydefeo.org/contacts.html>). The Quad Girls remained an important part of DeFeo's life until her death. She and her friends were linked by a common struggle to realize a personal excellence that family and school had assured them would be theirs. The goal of expanding access to higher education that the state acted on by investing billions of dollars for decade after decade provided the necessary condition that helps explain the priorities this one group of friends set for their individual lives. Excellence through education motivated their search for new ways of living together—as men and women, as Americans of different races and ethnicities, as productive members of a modern, cosmopolitan society. To the degree that California was in advance of the rest of the country and indeed the rest of the world in broadening access to university-level education and making advanced training and careers a commonplace cultural goal, the cultural shifts in the state that each generation has fostered decade by decade have significance for understanding developments that became widespread elsewhere later. The personal, political and economic contradictions were worked out first in the lives of Californians who struggled to reconcile big ideals with a whole host of customs and conventions, many of which they honored and even liked.

DeFeo relied on both a network of women modernist painters and a group of high school classmates to help find answers to the contradictions of being at one and the same time the objects and the authors of a grand social experiment. DeFeo's story underscores the lack of substance in the mythic dichotomy of conformist versus bohemian that so often structures writing and art exhibits in the postwar US. There were the beats in North Beach or other bohemian enclaves and then there was suburbia where everybody lived according the norms shown in television situation comedies. Rather than being separated, the supposed two worlds were intimately connected through the variety of personal connections people maintained with each. As with DeFeo and her high school classmates, ideals and ambitions fostered by an ambitious program to transform society with more broadly accessible education also linked people pursuing diverse practical goals. Changes in the arts after the Second World War went in tandem with changes in who was educated and how they went about their everyday lives. Further, cultural change resulted from excluded groups—be they artists within the university, women painters or students from working-class urban high schools—taking advantage of opportunities to insert themselves into new places. Postwar art certainly reflected the anxieties of an uncertain world, but it also expressed ambitious ideas

concerning the ability of individuals to transform themselves and everything they touched. Those dizzying visions of an expansive self were fueled by loving parents who encouraged their children to take it for granted that happiness could be theirs, by teachers at all school levels who motivated their best students to be ambitious, and by a committed program to build new institutions for the development of 'human capital'.

Clark Kerr, chancellor of the Berkeley campus from 1952 to 1958 and then president of the University of California system from 1958 to 1967, called the combination of demographic expansion with increasingly more radical ideas of human liberation a 'shock wave' that rolled across the state (Kerr 2003, p. 4). The state's politicians and increasingly the public were not prepared for the breadth of change that occurred. Kerr's conception of the university's role in modern society, articulated in his book *The Uses of the University* (Kerr 1963), tried to provide a vision of how higher education might contribute to a more dynamic society while containing disruptive effects. The grand social experiment unleashed by the idea of 'universal higher education' generated a backlash contributing to the election of Ronald Reagan as governor in 1966. Reagan fired Kerr in a symbolic gesture that captured the growing conservatism of US society and a desire to retrench. The state university system entered a lengthy period of lean years, while public education in the state began its dramatic decline, aggravated by the tax revolt of 1978. The findings presented do not conform to interpretations of the post-Second World War United States as conservative. The juxtaposition of institutional and subjective domains suggests on the contrary that, between 1945 and 1965, US society had entered a dynamic phase testing open-ended social experiments resting on faith in individual potential. A conviction in a can-do, problem-solving approach supported ambitious individual and national projects, supported indeed widespread hubris that contributed to the debacle of the Indochina wars (Cándida Smith 1995, pp. 269–298). The relative decline in public education that began in the 1970s, matched by the increased prestige of private schools, is one institutional correlate of the social conservatism of the United States since the 1960s. A subjective correlate would be a growing pessimism over the possibilities of what either individuals or the nation can successfully accomplish, a negative cast that ought to be puzzling given the immense wealth and resources of US society.

DeFeo's closest friend from high school confided that DeFeo was often sad, frequently upset about the inability of things to connect in her life. The friend went on to say that for most of the Quad Girls, despite all the accomplishments, there had been a lot of disconnect as well and a sense of

failure that none of them could explain. Somebody had convinced them, she said, that they could do anything. They had done a lot but always with guilt for not having been able to do more, of not having done as much as they were told they could. DeFeo's paintings still moved her because seeing them hanging on the wall of a museum, she faced an accomplishment that was tangible. She felt a pride of connection, and thought back over the years to the many ways she and DeFeo had helped each other. But she also saw the paintings as embodying in material form all the *loss* that had been dogging her for years. She stopped and apologized for being unclear. She was certain she could never explain what she meant. She did know that when she went to see DeFeo's most famous painting *The Rose*, restored and on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the pride her friend's painting inspired gave way to darker, more contradictory fears that would not stop stirring within her.

Notes

- [1] Progression of course synthesized from class notes for Art 2A in Worth Ryder papers. Lecture and observation notes related to the class were collected together but not organized according to term. In 1946, he outlined six points that he wanted his students to understand that marked his and hence the Berkeley approach to art pedagogy: 'Many instructors seem to emphasize the modern idiom. You may feel gypped in this class because I ask for a disciplined study of the rhetoric of painting'; 'The danger of placing emphasis on the style of one artist is that after you learn the style the vogue for that idiom may be gone'; 'The important thing is to learn a rich vocabulary not a style'; 'A sensitive person can hardly help feeling and therefore expressing the Zeitgeist. You do not have to worry about that. Americans want to jump over the drudgery and arrive at ends. A lot of the drudgery should come at an early age'; 'Evil of education is that old idioms are taught to students as new'; 'The point is that one should learn basic principles and not styles. . . . Above all cultivate the habit of seeing with the eyes'.
- [2] Sonya Rapaport, a student of Loran's in the late 1940s who became a good friend of his, recalled that he gave everything a psychological twist (interview with author, at her home in Berkeley, California, 12 December 2003).
- [3] Summary of Peterson's views also based on interviews conducted in summer 2000 by the author with former Peterson students Mary Murchio, Eleanor Anderson, Ruth Illg, Colin Graham, and her friend Professor Emeritus of Biology Howard Bern.
- [4] In a letter written in 1996, Pat Adams wrote of her friendship with DeFeo: 'We were young women; we were studying painting. It was Berkeley after World War II. The primary fact was (and remained constant) that we recognized each other—like a tribe of two—we knew we were artists. We knew we would do what was necessary for our work and would give our lives to it' (Adams to Bob Whyte, 26 October 1996, in the papers of the artist, on deposit at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

- [5] Fred Martin's art teacher at Alameda High School in Alameda, a small East Bay town near Oakland, also encouraged his inclination to be an artist, helping him overcome his fear of disappointing his parents and their expectations that he would major in the sciences.
- [6] See Cándida Smith 1995, pp. 3–31, and Cándida Smith 1996, pp. 21–40, for more elaborate discussions of this theme as it pertained to the developing art scene in the 1930s and the 1910s respectively.

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