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American Post-War Art

The Volcanoes of the West Coast

Hardly anyone has heard of Cameron, Jay DeFeo and the other women artists of the Beat Generation. Now, at last, they are being rediscovered.

By Alexandra González

Translated from the German by Sophie Schlondorff

Kenneth Anger, the grandmaster of American underground film, is 89 years old. But that didn't stop him from presenting his gallery project Lucifer Brothers Workshop at the Art Los Angeles Contemporary fair in late January. Next to 300-dollar bomber jackets emblazoned with "Lucifer," he offered several watercolors by his muse Cameron, who died in 1995. And anyone who has ever seen this redhead occultist in Anger's ecstatic 1954 short "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" will never forget her somnambulistic performance as the Scarlet Woman.

Yet only few people remember Cameron as an artist in her own right. And how could it be otherwise, since she burned many of her works – finely executed drawings of unsettling visions – and steadily refused to exhibit. Now, finally, she is receiving the recognition she was so wary of during her lifetime. Star gallerist Jeffrey Deitch recently celebrated his return to New York with the show "Cameron: Cinderella of the Wastelands." The dealer Nicole Klagsbrun is representing this poster girl of the Beat Generation, offering her works for between 10,000 and 200,000 dollars.

Cameron is not the only long-overlooked woman artist with roots in the Beat Generation who is currently being discovered by the general public in solo shows and major group exhibitions. Jay DeFeo, Deborah Remington, Sonia Gechtoff, Joan Brown and others also epitomize a hype that has been embraced gratefully by an art market starved for first-rate resources: still undervalued post-war art – by women, no less – coupled with an inexhaustible fascination for California's counterculture. Looking beyond the horizon of New York has always been worth it.

Rejecting conformism, they turned their gaze to their inner lives

No one understood this better than Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. By the mid-1950s, these spokesmen of the Beat movement had surfaced in San Francisco. The city hosted a bohemian world whose subversive imagination and lifestyle inspired by the desire for self-realization provided a blueprint for the counterculture tsunami of the subsequent decades. Far from the New York art establishment, a creative output influenced by poetry, bebop and spirituality, and intended for a handful of friends, came into being.

The Beats rejected the conformism of the “American way of life,” focusing their productive spotlights on their own inner lives instead. Women artists played an active role in the scene. Unlike their New York counterparts in Abstract Expressionism, they felt accepted by their male sparring partners. A lack of opportunities to exhibit led six Beats, including Deborah Remington, to establish the Six Gallery in a former garage on Halloween in 1954. Here, Ginsberg read from his poem of outrage, “Howl,” for the first time. During its three years in existence, the collective showed works by Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown and Sonia Gechtoff, among others.

As painters, these women not only made important contributions to the counterculture of their time but to a larger artistic canon as well. Even institutions have come to recognize this, albeit rather belatedly. In 2013, the Whitney Museum dedicated a retrospective to DeFeo. Beginning in June, she and her associates Gechtoff and Remington will be represented in the overdue “Women of Abstract Expressionism” show at the Denver Art Museum. And, through April 23, Deborah Remington’s idiosyncratic paintings and drawings can be scrutinized at Kimmerich in Berlin.

With her coolly glowing metallic-paint canvases, which seem to be illuminated from behind, and strange repertoire of shapes – between engine block and house of mirrors – Remington was far ahead of her time. And, at the very latest this summer, when the Centre Pompidou opens its “Beat Generation” retrospective – with pieces by DeFeo, photographs and videos by Joanne Kyger and a key work by the avant-garde film artist Jane Conger Belson – it will become clear: This club never belonged exclusively to the wild poets.

“Sometimes history finds a way of rewriting itself,” says Rani Singh of the Getty Research Institute, who co-curated this first comprehensive show in Europe about the Beat Generation. “Luckily, we’re in the process of reevaluating post-war modernism now. And discovering a lot of surprises.” Björn Alfors of Galerie Eva Presenbuber, which brought DeFeo’s work to

Europe in 2013, makes a similar observation: “Even very young galleries that want to build up their own contemporary artists like to underpin their program with these post-war items. There’s a certain coolness about artists like Jay DeFeo. In Europe, it makes sense to take up someone whose creative output also exudes such a mysterious aura.”

The auction market has been quick to react. Bonhams regularly includes such pieces in its “Made in California” sales in Los Angeles. A painting by Joan Brown – whose “subjective realism” corresponds to Frida Kahlo’s naïve self-adulation – brought a record price of 139,250 dollars there. In the next auction, on May 4 and 5, DeFeo’s “The Arrival” (estimated at 12,000-18,000 dollars) and Brown’s “Berchard’s Brandy” (40,000-60,000 dollars) are the leading pieces among those on offer by the Beats.

By now, the Beats’ individuality and sensitivity, their unfettered creativity, hipster beards and black tights have come to represent an indestructible promise of freedom. Yet their artistic survival in the leaden McCarthy era was hard won. The dissidents of California’s counterculture broke down boundaries between life and art, celebrated the everyday and ephemeral, experimented with genres and with cheap, widely available materials. Even an art form as conventional as painting seemed to find its raw materials in the backyards of the detested society of affluence.

The American art critic Thomas Albright described DeFeo’s early work as “immense creations that mixed house paint, stones, string and God knows what else, making great, lava-like slags that carried Abstract Expressionist textures into a dimension of funky, hybrid painting-sculpture.” Ruth Asawa’s hanging cocoon sculptures made of tightly crocheted wire – which now sell for over a million dollars at international auctions – were rejected by the San Francisco Arts Commission because it only supported sculpture made of classic materials like stone or wood.

When a gallery showed one of her drawings, the police shut it down

Assemblages, collages and Mail Art were created and compiled in journals such as Wallace Berman’s hand-printed loose-leaf series “Semina.” In 1955, Cameron appeared on the cover of the first issue, which also included her “Peyote Vision.” When this suggestive drawing – a demon, its head as furrowed as the mescaline-containing cactus, penetrates a woman on all fours from behind – was shown two years later at Ferus in L.A., the police shut down the gallery and arrested Berman. Now, the gates of perception for

Cameron's psychotropic art have once again been thrown wide open in the City of Angels.