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Jonathan Griffin, "Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction 1946 to 1963," *Picpus*, no. 6 (Summer 2011)

BELLA PACIFICA: BAY AREA ABSTRACTION 1946 TO 1963 REVIEWED BY JONATHAN GRIFFIN



Jay DeFeo in front of *The Rose* in her studio, 1961, photographed by Marty Sacco. Courtesy The Jay DeFeo Trust

Between 1946 and 1952, the proportion of students at California's five most important art schools who had served in the military was never less than 70 percent, and frequently more than 80. Most of these enrolled with assistance from the GI Bill, the monumental piece of post-war legislation that swelled the ranks of liberal arts courses across the United States with mature, motivated and philosophically reflective men and women, alive to the preciousness of their personal freedoms.

The influx was a lifesaver for the failing California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. Upon his appointment in 1945, the dynamic young director Douglas MacAgy hired a squadron of new artist-teachers, amongst them Edward Corbett, David Park, Hassel Smith, Clay

Spohn, and a year later Elmer Bischoff, Clyfford Still and Richard Diebenkorn. 1946 was also the year that Abstract Expressionism arrived at the school from New York; its impact was felt throughout.

Bischoff later remarked, 'there were not really instructors and students so much as there were older artists and there were younger artists.' He and other teachers, MacAgy included, played in The Studio 13 Jass Band (sic), rehearsing at the school late into the night. Jazz's spontaneity, its lack of structure, its loudness and humour, had a profound effect on Bay Area abstract painting, which was often thickly impastoed and clashingly colourful. Equally influential was experimental poetry and literature; it was, after all, in 1948 that the term 'Beat' was reportedly first used

in a conversation between writers Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes. Artists such as Bruce Conner and Jess used sculptural assemblage and collage to drag the detritus of street life into art's purview.

Beat culture was ecstatic, visionary, even religious; it was also, like Action Painting, grandly performative. Venues were founded for art, poetry and music – very often presented all at once. It was one Friday evening in 1955 that Allen Ginsberg first read 'Howl' to a packed audience at 6 Gallery. The space had been opened a year before by poet Jack Spicer and five of his students from the California School of Fine Arts – John Allen Ryan, Deborah Remington, David Simpson, Hayward King, and Wally Hedrick. It closed a year later. Nobody much remembers what art was shown; it was 'right now' that was important, and it never occurred to anyone to document their activities for future historians. Nevertheless, these and other associated artists contributed to the centrepiece, at David Nolan Gallery in New York, of a recent four-part exhibition titled 'Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction, 1946-1963' (also at Nyehaus, Franklin Parrasch Gallery and Leslie Feely Fine Art).

This period is typically historicized as a tussle between two styles:

New York-influenced Abstract Expressionism (of which Still was the West-Coast progenitor) and a dissenting, expressly local brand of figuration. In fact, they are impossible to disentwine. Many artists flip-flopped back and forth: Diebenkorn, for example, who had hitherto made landscape-based abstract canvases, became the prime exponent of Bay Area figuration between 1955 and 1968 (influenced by Bischoff and Park) before abruptly returning to expansive, light-filled, geometric abstraction. Jay DeFeo, a major Abstract Expressionist, also produced graphic drawings such as *The Eyes* (1958). Her husband, Wally Hedrick, later recollected that the painters themselves used to mock this bogus rivalry by organizing softball matches between the two camps; Hedrick, espousing a wildly mercurial approach, was the artist they entrusted as umpire.

Hassel Smith noted at the time that the area's 'number one influence' was its lack of a market. 'The "San Francisco School" is therefore marked by its ungraciousness, its positive unwillingness to please. In no other locality will you find so many paintings being produced about which it can be said, "I wouldn't put THAT on my shit-house wall."'

Bella Pacifica: Bay Area Abstraction 1946 to 1963 was at David Nolan Gallery, Nyehaus and Leslie Feely Fine Art, New York.

Jonathan Griffin is a writer living in Los Angeles.