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Rat Bastard Protective Association and Jay DeFeo

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp says a pair of shows illuminate the lively

During the years of the Eisenhower presidency, 1953-1961, Los Angeles was a hub of conservative provinciality. Progressively-minded West Coast artists tended to congregate in San Francisco. An insightful new book by UC Press, [Welcome to Painterland](#), Bruce Conner and the Rat Bastard Protective Association bring to light the collective and individual accomplishments of the range of artists who lived in a small apartment building at 2322 Fillmore Street.

Author Anastasia Aukeman has pulled together disparate friendships, rivalries, love affairs, drug use and creativity in the art of Conner and his wife Jean Conner, Wally Hedrick and his wife Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown and her husband Bill Brown, Manuel Neri, (who moved in with her after their divorce), Sonia Gechtof and James Kelly, (before they moved to New York,) poet Michael McClure and his poet wife Joanna McClure, who dubbed the three-story apartment building Painterland. James Newman, close friend of Walter Hopps, also lived there and opened Dilexi Gallery with Robert Alexander. They showed LA artists Craig Kauffman and Ed Moses, who also wound up living there. Wallace and Shirley Berman were neighbors along with their friend George Herms. Jess and Robert Duncan were attracted to the Fillmore area and opened their Pere Ubu Gallery. The quixotic Bruce Conner was the one who came up with the name Rat Bastard Protective Association and formed a collective with himself as president and host of meetings.



Aukeman has organized an exhibition based on the findings of her book at [the Landing](#) gallery through January 7, 2017. It includes an open-minded selection of art by some of these artists as well as ephemera from the period. Conner titled his 1958 assemblage with a carrying handle and made of old nylon stockings, canvas and newsprint Rat Bastard, a thing so disreputable that bringing it with him to his interview with the draft board got him dismissed from service. It's All True, a retrospective of Conner's work, is at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) through January 29, 2017. Perhaps that is why there is only one assemblage and few works on paper at the

Landing but there is compensation in the excellent selection of early assemblage by George Herms such as "Wooden Star" (c. 1960), the six-pointed Star of David painted white and topped with a four-petaled flower made of tin cans.

Other highlights include "Wood and Grasscloth Figure" (1956-1957) by Neri that combines the power of tribal art with classical form. Large scale paintings by Hedrick, a founder of the artist-run Six Gallery in the Fillmore area, are rarely seen and this show includes three, including "Things Are," (1960) a tondo of golds and deep reds in the pattern of a cosmic mandala. Further emphasizing the camaraderie is a selection of black and white photographs taken during the period by Jerry Burchard, many of DeFeo. The show includes a couple of her strangely enticing 1955 paintings.

At [Marc Selwyn Fine Art](#), however, there is a handsome selection of DeFeo's later work in Paintings on Paper 1986-1987. Considered one of the most important painters of her generation, she was lauded by fellow artists in the Bay Area and LA. Around 1958 she became consumed with work on a single huge painting, "The Rose." Layered with plaster that she carved into the abstract shape of a flower, DeFeo worked on the ten-foot-tall panel until 1965 when she was evicted from the Fillmore studio. By then it weighed a ton and had to be removed by forklift, a move so epic it was filmed by Conner. (It is now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.)

The works at Selwyn were influenced by DeFeo's 1985 trip to Japan as well as seeing an exhibition of Japanese helmets from between the 16th and 19th century. Most are simple, bold gestures in white, gray and black. These disciplined abstractions are both tough and serene. DeFeo had only two more years to live before succumbing to lung cancer in 1989. The craziness of the Rat Bastard years was in her distant past but there is richness and strength in these mature works. The show continues through January 7, 2017.