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BEYOND FLOWER POWER

by Hunter Drohojowska

Georgia O'Keeffe, the most famous woman artist of our time, remains both a compelling mystery and a powerful influence, as seen in a major new retrospective.

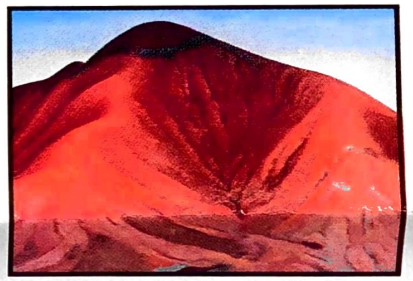
THE SENSUOUS AND THE RIGOROUS The artist, *above*, as photographed by her husband Alfred Stieglitz in 1920. Her oil, Small Purple Hills of 1934, *top, right*, is an early depiction of the Southwest landscape that had such an impact on her life and art. Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. V, 1930, *right*, takes natural forms to the edge of abstraction. Her large pastel of 1941, An Orchid, *opposite page*, is a full-blown evocation of the physicality of a flower.

Two years after her death, Georgia O'Keeffe is still seen as an icon of mysterious, seductive womanhood. She is popularly viewed as the mother of major flower painting, the beloved inspiration for Alfred Stieglitz' last photographs and the embodiment of his observation, "At last, a woman on paper"—as if she were the first female artist to distill the essence of womanhood in her work. Today, those words are thought to be a contrived fiction. So are many of the comparable myths about O'Keeffe.

The artist herself was annoyed by the accretion of falsehoods over her 98 years, but she rarely troubled to correct them. She found that her legend conveniently camouflaged her true identity and served as a decoy for the press. So it is only in death, not life, that we finally may come to know the real Georgia O'Keeffe.

To that end, on the centennial of her birth, the National Gallery of Art has organized the first retrospective devoted to the artist since 1970, including many rarely seen paintings from her estate. The selection (more than 100) opens on November 1 in Washington and will travel during the next year to the Art Institute of Chicago, the Dallas Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

"It's time for the demystification to take place, and to look at Miss O'Keeffe's artwork—the statement that remains after the artist is gone," says Juan Hamilton, the artist's business manager for the last 14 years of her life. "It's time to be objective about what she did, what she painted, what she said about it, what she didn't. To get over the innuendo, the mystical and superficial focus, we can start with the very real record of what is left."



Hamilton has organized the exhibition with National Gallery curators Jack Cowart and Sarah Greenough, selecting some of O'Keeffe's lesser-known paintings over her big box-office draws. The show features many charcoals, watercolors and pastels, in order to explore the parallels between her totally abstract paintings and her stylized, stark landscapes, still lifes, flowers and anatomical studies. The vibrant abstraction Series I, No. 8, of 1919, for example, is as suggestive of sexuality as the euphemistic oversized flower paintings of the same period.

The exhibition's large catalog buttresses a new view of O'Keeffe with 125 letters written by her between 1915 and 1981. This evidence, brought together for the first time, offers (CONTINUED ON PAGE 258)

PORTRAIT COURTESY OF THE ALFRED STIEGLITZ ARCHIVE, NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART. PAINTINGS: MALCOLM VARON. © ESTATE OF GEORGIA O'KEEFFE.

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an O'Keeffe who is considerably more worldly and educated than the myth of the lovely, lonely artist alone in the desert painting flowers and skulls.

As Greenough points out in her essay, O'Keeffe was not a naive and intuitive female creature—"modern by instinct," as described by the artist Marsden Hartley. She was not simply petted, promoted and photographed by her mentor and husband Stieglitz. She was a hardheaded—at times hard-hearted—survivor of a tumultuous youth. A pragmatic simplicity, acquired on the family farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, dictated some of her most complex decisions, even aesthetic ones.

Although her family fell on hard times, she managed to piece together an education at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Art Students League and Teachers College of Columbia University, in New York. By the time she met Stieglitz in 1916, she had visited his 291 gallery regularly, read his magazine "291," as well as the socialist magazine "The Masses," and the influential Kandinsky text "The Spiritual in Art." She had seen the work of Rodin, Matisse and Picasso, and was aware of developments in European abstract painting. She was uncomfortable with words, however, especially with the theories of art world intellectuals. This reinforced the myth of her pure, unsophisticated American talent.

In addition, Stieglitz' photographs of a distant, enigmatic, feline O'Keeffe—especially the sensual nudes that were first exhibited in 1921—established her as a celebrity. That manufactured image has survived but it doesn't quite jibe with the energetic, wise, humorful prose of her letters or her history. In 1915, O'Keeffe, who was then 28, wrote to her friend Anita Pollitzer: "I believe an artist is the last person in the world who can afford to be affected."

Charming and Wicked

The O'Keeffe of the letters is charming and wicked and funny in a way her myth is not. She writes to art critic Henry McBride of her pleasure with his review of her work in 1923: "I was particularly pleased—that with three women to write about you put me first—My particular kind of vanity—doesn't mind not being noticed at all . . . and I don't even mind being called names—but I don't like to be second or third or fourth—I like being first—if I'm noticed at all—that's why I get on with Stieglitz." (O'Keeffe's eccentric punctuation and spelling, with dashes and ellipses that divide her stream-of-consciousness letters, evolves with the impressionistic style of her painting.)

McBride wrote deftly about her art and defused the erotic implications with humor, even suggesting she get herself to a nunnery. But most of the reviews of the period equated her personal sexuality—reinforced by her nude poses for Stieglitz—with the message of her paintings, especially the still lifes of flowers and fruit. The public praises for her delicacy, her femininity, her sensual power were encouraged by Stieglitz and his Freud-reading friends. But O'Keeffe found that kind of attention confusing and embarrassing. In 1922, she wrote that such reviews "make me seem like some strange sort of creature floating in the air—breathing in clouds for nourishment—when the truth is that I like beefsteak—and like it rare at that."

Thinking that another woman might have a more objective interpretation, she sought reviews from writers such as the art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan. "What I want written—I do not know—I have no definite idea of what it should be—but a woman who has lived many things and who sees lines and colors as an expression of living—might say something that a man cant—I feel there is something unexplored about woman that only a woman can explore."

O'Keeffe, in the end, was disappointed in Dodge's response to her art but she accepted an invitation to her home in Taos, New Mexico, in 1929. Spending the summer in those wide open plains, she could forget the prying eyes of social and intellectual Manhattan, and return to her simple, rural roots.

In August, on the train returning to New York, she wrote to her socialite artist friend Ettie Stettheimer: "I have frozen in the mountains in rain and hail—and slept out under the stars—and cooled and burned on the desert so that riding through Kansas on the train when everyone is wilting about me seems nothing at all for heat . . . I laughed a great deal—I went everyplace that I had time to go—and I'm ready to go back East as long as I have to go sometime—If it were not for the Stieglitz call I would probably never go—but that is strong—so I am on the way."

The strain of her desire for the wide open spaces of the Southwest, contrasted with her love for her husband Stieglitz in Manhattan, helped bring about an emotional and physical collapse in 1932. Thereafter, the photographs taken by Stieglitz portray a serious and introspective O'Keeffe. As Greenough points out, O'Keeffe adopted this image for the rest of her life. When she was photographed later by Yousuf Karsh or Arnold Newman, she often adopted the same poses. This one-dimensional persona served as stand-in, a replicant available to the public, so her reputation as a haughty recluse became part of the myth.

But it is a more romantic soul who writes to a woman friend with breathless awe of the experience of flying east over Amarillo country in 1941. "The world all simplified and beautiful and clear-cut in patterns like time and history will simplify and straighten out these times of ours—What one sees from the air is so simple and so beautiful I cannot help feeling that it would do something wonderful for the human race—rid it of much smallness and pettishness if more people flew—However, I am probably wrong because I will probably not really be very different when I get my feet on the earth than I was when they left it. . . ."

After Stieglitz' death in 1946, O'Keeffe made her home at the Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico. Her status as celebrity and recluse was now frozen in amber. This controversial reputation, as employed by impresario Stieglitz, had been an effective marketing tool, but a new revisionist art history of O'Keeffe is the task of today, as evidenced by the National Gallery's exhibition.

Yet there persists the schizophrenic view of O'Keeffe and her art that results from the incompatibility of demystification and marketing. How ironic that only a few months before her centennial retrospective, an O'Keeffe petunia painting should be reproduced and described in a mass-circulation newspaper as "explicitly sexual"! O'Keeffe may have passed on, but the myths accepted as her identity have a life of their own.

Editor's Note: Hunter Drohojowska, Chair of the Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles, is currently working on a full-scale biography of O'Keeffe to be published by Knopf.

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Also newly published is *Georgia O'Keeffe: One Hundred Flowers* (Alfred A. Knopf Inc., in association with Callaway Editions).