



Courtesy of J. Paul Getty Museum

O'Keeffe on portraits by Stieglitz: 'I was photographed with a kind of heat and excitement and in a way wondered what it was all about.'

Georgia on His Mind

An exhibit at Getty Museum casts new light on the relationship between artist Georgia O'Keeffe and photographer Alfred Stieglitz

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

Georgia O'Keeffe is famous for her paintings of gigantic, voluptuous flowers; her love affair and then marriage to pioneering photographer and far-sighted gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz, and her retreat late in life to a remote adobe house in the hills of Abiquiu, N.M. She is probably America's most popular artist.

She has been the subject of a few biographies, two critical studies, a novel, a TV movie, half a dozen coffee-table art books and many retrospective exhibitions, the last briskly organized by the National Gallery of Art in 1987, the year after her death at the age of 98. She was obsessed with maintaining her privacy, but the public now knows quite a bit about her.

The J. Paul Getty Museum contributes to this investigation with the exhibition "Two Lives: O'Keeffe by Stieglitz, 1917-1924," opening Tuesday and continuing through Sept. 13.

The 45 portraits of O'Keeffe, organized by Getty curator of photographs Weston Naef, reveal that there is still much that is a mystery to all but a few scholars. The Getty recently bought 13 Stieglitz photographs from the O'Keeffe estate, 11 of which are portraits of the artist. These have been augmented by loans from the Art Institute of Chicago and the National Gallery. Twenty-two of the photographs have not been seen by the public since their original showing more than 70 years ago.

Stieglitz believed that a true portrait of a person would be a form of "photographic diary," documenting a person from birth to death. His portrait of O'Keeffe consists of about 325 photographs he made beginning in 1917 when he exhibited her drawings at his gallery, "291." He continued photographing her until 1937. Stieglitz first exhibited 45 of



O'Keeffe, from the Getty Museum exhibition opening Tuesday, caught in one of her 'varjant personas.'

these images in a 37-year survey of his work at the Anderson Galleries in Manhattan in 1921. Many of the photographs featured a nude O'Keeffe posed provocatively before her own paintings and drawings. Reactions ranged from the appreciative to the astonished to the appalled. The response was immense from both critics and viewers. For reasons that Stieglitz and O'Keeffe kept to themselves, photos from the portrait were shown publicly only once more—in 1932 at a 40-year Stieglitz retrospective.

Naef reintroduced the portraits to the public in 1978. Then associate curator in the department of prints and photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where about 65 of the photographs were on loan, he persuaded the reticent and reclusive O'Keeffe not only to show the pictures but also to publish them as a book, "O'Keeffe by Stieglitz."

In the introduction to that volume, O'Keeffe is direct about the ambience of those photo sessions: "I was photographed with a kind of heat and excitement and in a way wondered what it was all about." In 1918, the 30-year-old O'Keeffe gave up her position as an art teacher in Canyon, Tex., and, with the support of Stieglitz, moved into a studio on East 59th Street in Manhattan to pursue her painting. Within weeks, the 54-year-old Stieglitz left his wife to become O'Keeffe's live-in companion. The first years of this love affair and creative caldron is captured at the Getty.

Naef says: "This exhibition is a celebration of a subject I care deeply about, that is, the extraordinary interaction between two creative geniuses of our century, their total symbiosis of style and artistry, lifestyle and attitude, that seems to be unique in the history of art."

Since Naef's 1978 show, there has been a great deal of critical thought and writing about Stieglitz's representations of O'Keeffe, much of it questioning whether the photographs are exploitative or fetishistic, whether Stieglitz used the portraits to manipulate and publicize the then-unknown paintings by O'Keeffe and whether O'Keeffe was a willing collaborator. Naef chooses not to explore any of these issues. "This is not a re-examination, not an exegesis, not a deconstruction of the subject," he says firmly.

"This exhibition is very personal. It's not a survey, it's just the great flowering of their relationship when it was at its most fervent, when the infatuation and idolatry they showed for each other was at its most intense. [It] reflects a place that could only be called close to heaven. There is a magical air all around those early works. They seem to be making history rather than recording history. If something like this happened before, there is no such direct physical evidence."

Naef had several goals in selecting the pictures. "I never throw out the masterpieces just because they've been seen." He has included classic images such as O'Keeffe in a white kimono, with her long hair tumbling around her shoulders or wearing a bowler hat and posed in front of her painting of a curled blue form.

Naef continues: "My objective was to show the masterpieces in a new context, to reveal some essential threads in this artistic evolution that O'Keeffe and Stieglitz had failed to make known."

The major coup of this exhibition is the inclusion of a phallic white sculpture, a bronze cast of a Plasticine model last seen in O'Keeffe's 1917 exhibition at Stieglitz's gallery. The sculpture was known to art historians through photographs, but it was thought by many to have disappeared. According to Naef, O'Keeffe and her assistant Juan Hamilton had cast 10 copies of the sculpture in 1979 but never released them to the market.

This exhibition marks the first time the cast sculpture will be seen, along with a photograph of O'Keeffe holding it and another of it posed with her bare feet. The sexual implications of these photographs are difficult to deny. Naef included them as aspects of what he calls "O'Keeffe's variant personas." Referring to the picture of O'Keeffe grasping the cylindrical form, he says: "This variant persona is the woman making a direct association with the counter-female sensibilities."

Naef chose many of the photographs to present other "variant personas" never seen before by the public. "The masculine persona of O'Keeffe was not evident in earlier selections of work," he says, holding a darkly printed photograph of O'Keeffe, her brow furrowed with anxiety. "You're not sure if she is a man or woman or even if it is O'Keeffe." Turning to a photograph of a bare bottom, Naef observes: "We never think of O'Keeffe as prone or with her back to us."

"The persona of genuine girliness is in a photograph of O'Keeffe wearing a white dress," Naef says. "Stieglitz saw O'Keeffe as a little

girl and a symbol of whiteness, the epitome of virtue. This portrait goes back to the 19th Century and images of women in perpetual girlhood."

Referring to a photograph of a bold nude torso of O'Keeffe, Naef says: "Stieglitz vacillates between O'Keeffe as a little girl and as a woman. Here she is woman *cum laude*, a Venus."

Naef believes that all these contradictory and complementary personas were created not by O'Keeffe but by Stieglitz: "Stieglitz is molding his subject, not by directorial authority, but by the power of suggestion and a vision to create several different personas in one body. It's why, I think, she allowed herself to be photographed. She was fascinated by how many people Stieglitz could see in her. She marveled, 'It wasn't me that did this. It was him.'

"What is hardest for art historians to talk about is what Stieglitz contributed. It's so easy for us to talk about her face, her body being seized, rather than O'Keeffe as raw material that in a skillful way he shapes to his own vision, creating something that didn't exist. O'Keeffe had no idea these were aspects of herself."

Naef's exhibition is important not only for the new ways in which an audience will be able to see O'Keeffe by Stieglitz, but also for the fact that this may be one of the last times these photographs will be shown in an institutional context.

In 1949, O'Keeffe felt that Stieglitz's photographs were looking "less fresh" and asked his old friend Edward Steichen to do a chemical conservation treatment.

It appears that he immersed the prints in an acidic bath that may have made them highly unstable.

David Scott, head of museum services at the Getty Conservation Institute, along with conservators from the Art Institute of Chicago and the National Gallery of Art, are conducting research to discover the possible consequences of Steichen's well-meant treatments. In addition, Scott is attempting to ascertain Stieglitz's original printing and developing formulas.

During the exhibition, the conservators will be closely monitoring the prints to see if any fading can be detected.

Naef says many of Stieglitz's greatest prints have been affected:

"It's safe to say that in the future, some of the O'Keeffe-by-Stieglitz photographs will have very limited exposure to light."

So it turns out that the material evidence of this reclusive couple's passion is elusive in the most fundamental sense. How like the very fable of the O'Keeffe-Stieglitz relationship. It is as though, even after death, they still insist on their privacy. □

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