

ART REVIEW | GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

In Full Flower, Before the Desert

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There are two Georgia O'Keeffes. They're closely related, but one is far more interesting than the other. Not so interesting, except maybe as a marketing phenomenon, is the post-1930s cow-skull painter and striker of frontier-priestess poses. More interesting, and less familiar, is the artist found in "[Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction](#)," a vivid and surprisingly surprising show of more than 130 paintings and drawings at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#).

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Philadelphia Museum of Art
"Red and Orange Streak" (1919) is part of Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction at the Whitney. [More Photos](#) »

The show's focus is on the first two decades of O'Keeffe's long career. The story starts in 1915, when she was an art teacher in South Carolina and produced her first abstract drawings, which were also among the first fully abstract images by any American artist. Three years later she had her first encounter with the photographer and dealer [Alfred Stieglitz](#), who set her up in New York, initiating a long personal, professional and mutually promotional partnership.

The saga winds down in the 1930s, when O'Keeffe was spending increasing amounts of time alone in New Mexico, working on becoming the mythical figure beloved of popular glossies in her day and museum gift shops now.

That myth gets limited space in the Whitney show. Instead we're presented with a concentration of O'Keeffe's early paintings, most of them abstract. And we're invited to see how bold, graphically punchy and sensuous this work could be, with its big centralized forms, modulated volumes and illusionistic depiction of space. You

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experience the paintings whole and fast, as you do a strong scent or a sensation of touch, processing your reactions — What am I seeing? What does it mean? Do I like it? — later.

These rounded, shaded images feel as if they can be almost physically grasped, which may have a lot to do with O'Keeffe's abiding popularity. With their naturalistic weight, her abstract forms appeal to some basic appetite for tactility. A similar combination of abstraction and description accounts for the allure of another 20th-century American artist, [Edward Hopper](#), who carved a pictorial world from blocks of light. The mood of his art is very different from that of O'Keeffe's, but their basic method of depiction is the same.

That method is evident right away at the Whitney in a large O'Keeffe drawing called "Early Abstraction" from 1915. Its single form, against a blank ground, is a sweeping upright with a curling fiddlehead top: like an abstract version of Beardsley's Salome, a big, Art Nouveau exclamation point. Drawn in receding layers of shading, it's basically an exercise in linear design, but with an air of mystery and the heft of sculpture.

O'Keeffe would repeat this shape often over the years. (She likened it and a handful of other recurrent images — curved forms pierced by a central crack or slit, for example — to musical motifs.) It appears multiplied in a series of 1918 oil paintings, in which the curling forms have become soft and rainbow colored. In paintings from 10 years later the shape gains naturalistic form as the pistils and stamens of giant flowers.

The flower paintings made O'Keeffe a popular success beginning in the 1920s. But they emerged from her more challenging abstract work, which itself emerged from an electric moment in American culture.

O'Keeffe's beginnings as an artist came slightly before that time. She first came to New York from Virginia in 1907, when she was 20, to attend the Art Students League. There she studied with William Merritt Chase and followed his conservative painterly lead for a while. Afterward she took teaching jobs far away from the city, but kept her finger on its pulse long-distance.

In 1912 she learned of the aesthetic theory being espoused by Arthur Wesley Dow at [Columbia University](#), a utopian vision of a consciousness-shaping art based on harmonious abstract design. Soon afterward, she was introduced to the radical thinking of the New York social critic Randolph Bourne, whose proto-feminist writings were in line with O'Keeffe's own views of female equality and independence.

She was working in Amarillo, Tex., in 1913 when [the Armory Show](#) hit New York, but on later trips she saw lots of new European work — [Picasso](#), [Matisse](#), Braque — much of it at Stieglitz's gallery. And she gradually formed stimulating friendships with painters like Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove and [Marsden Hartley](#). Dove, an abstraction

pioneer, set a particularly encouraging example.

She probably needed one. Outside of narrow avant-garde circles no audience or market for abstract art existed. In the popular press it was at best dismissed as a scam and at worst reviled as un-American. But O'Keeffe's stake in it was not commercial or social or formal. Abstraction was simply the only kind of art, she said, that let her express her deepest feelings.

What were those feelings? She couldn't describe them. "Words and I are not good friends," she wrote to Stieglitz in an early letter. So Stieglitz and other commentators described them for her, asserting that her art was about the essence of womanhood, about the female body, about sexuality.

To underscore the message, Stieglitz made photographs — there are several in the exhibition — of O'Keeffe posing in front of her paintings, echoing their forms with her arms and hands. He also photographed her nude body, often in close-up. The pictures amounted to a public declaration that O'Keeffe and he, a married man, were lovers. They also typecast O'Keeffe as a liberated woman, assuring that her art would be viewed in erotic terms.

Obviously she was a willing collaborator in all of this. She posed for the pictures, helped to process them and applied the cropping and close-up techniques she learned from them to her paintings. She made many of those paintings suggestively sexual. But what was really at stake was power. O'Keeffe wanted the power to include sexuality in her art's expressive range, without necessarily making it the subject. Stieglitz wanted the power to define her art purely in terms of feminine sexuality, and to market it accordingly.

By the mid-1920s O'Keeffe realized the corner she was in and knew she had to get out of it. She also understood that her approach to abstraction was part of the problem, and tried to change it, moving from curves to rectangles. A result was a remarkable group of small vertical pictures seemingly inspired by New York, though her upright forms look less like skyscraper walls than like sheets of folded and creased cloth, their gray surfaces composed from delicately whited-down layers of blues and reds.

Then she cut back on abstraction. One theory has it that she adopted Southwestern images — cow skulls and so on — as a final step in public-image adjustment, using them to effect a complete break with New York art associations. Another suggests that the change was part of a canny effort to align herself with a taste for regionalism that had developed with the Depression.

Whatever her motives, she never fully abandoned abstraction. She returned to it in the 1950s with Barnett Newman-esque paintings of adobe houses, and in the 1960s with aerial views of clouds and desert. But whatever presence these paintings have comes from their large scale; the expressive drive of the early work is missing.

That absence helps explain the drop in tension at the very end of the

exhibition, which has been organized by a curatorial team led by Barbara Haskell and Sasha Nicholas of the Whitney. And without that tension there isn't much. The pictures feel flaccid: there's nothing to grasp. An incipient hokiness that mars so much of her post-New York output goes unchecked. In short, the not-interesting O'Keeffe is center stage.

But, as I say, that's just in the concluding gallery. The good news is that the other O'Keeffe, an adventurous, uneven but often audacious artist, rules everywhere else.

"Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction" continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art through Jan. 17. It travels to the Phillips Collection, Washington, Feb. 6 to May 9, 2010; and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, N.M., May 28 to Sept. 12.

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