Of, For, and By Georgia O'Keeffe

Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion

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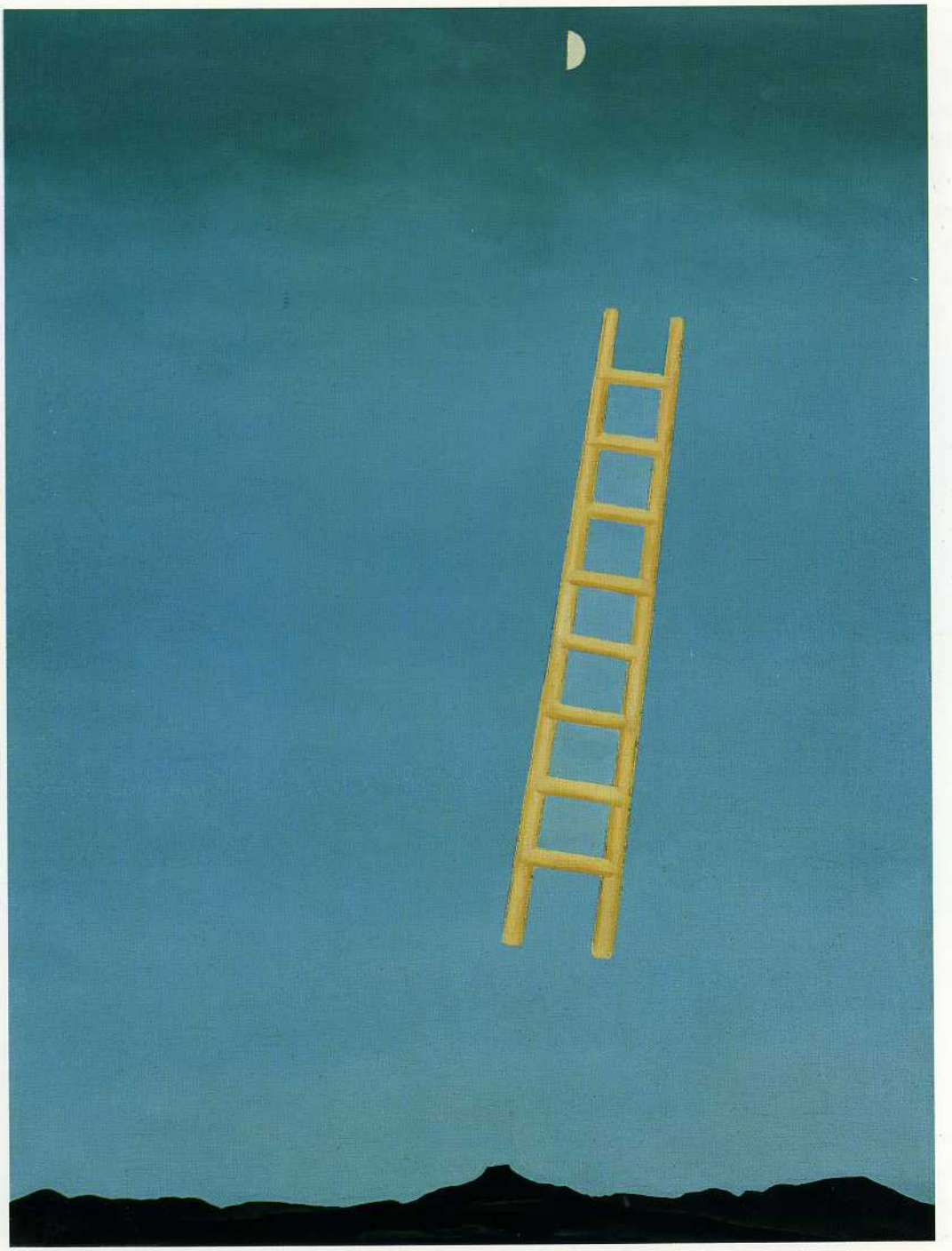


Georgia O'Keeffe

Ladder to the Moon, 1958

O'Keeffe's Body of Art

Alfred Stieglitz fell in love with Georgia O'Keeffe's art first and with O'Keeffe herself soon after.[1] And due in part to the intense photographic scrutiny this love for her prompted, neither he nor anyone else could ever again easily separate the two: attraction to O'Keeffe's body from attraction to O'Keeffe's body of art. O'Keeffe's formidable face, hands, and physique continued to exercise a magnetism on photographers—Stieglitz was just the first of many to trail her with a camera—for the rest of her days. Fascination with the artist's life followed from fascination with her body, moreover, as she eventually became the subject of a deluge of biographies. No one seems to tire of hearing the story of O'Keeffe's life, just as no one seems to tire of gazing at her form. But O'Keeffe's art, unfortunately, never has been granted anything like the same close, careful scrutiny as O'Keeffe herself. That is not to say that her art has been unpopular—to the contrary—but its popularity has long prevailed more among the general public than among scholars.

What of O'Keeffe's famous looks? No one could mistake them for those of a mannequin or beauty queen. But O'Keeffe had a physical presence perhaps unequaled by any artist in this century. That strong-featured face and that statuesque body, with its forms at once angular and curvy, projected a demeanor that ran the gamut from smolderingly sensual, to gravely serious and knowing, to willful and courageous, to mischievous and flirtatious. What also made O'Keeffe photogenic was her distinctive personal style. Refusing such distracting, ladylike trappings as makeup and salon hairdos, high heels, lace, ruffles, and patterns, O'Keeffe turned herself out in simple but artfully cut black-and-white outfits (which for years she sewed herself), calculated to appear at once practical and elegant, austere and subtly seductive.

In the early 1980s, the prominent American fashion designer Calvin Klein proved he had an insight into O'Keeffe that her partisans had overlooked: that she possessed a flair, a consummate, unerring sense of style that had always extended beyond the canvas onto her striking figure and into the environments she designed about her—though nowhere more so than in the home in New Mexico that she shaped toward the end of her life. "Georgia was crazy about decorating," an erstwhile friend, the painter Agnes Martin, remarked.[2] While Martin looked askance at O'Keeffe's intense interest in having everything in her house just so—a concern stereotypically feminine in a way that neither she nor O'Keeffe had ever allowed themselves to be defined—Calvin Klein instead saluted her, photographing a fashion campaign at her stunning Abiquiu home. With O'Keeffe as a silent partner, Klein helped to ignite the latest fervor for the Southwest, or "Santa Fe style." Not that O'Keeffe "discovered" the Southwest, of course, but the Southwest—in all its sheer, heartstopping glory—has been discovered by many of the rest of us initially thanks to her vision.

The idea that an artist's style might well encompass not only how she painted but everything

Alfred Stieglitz

Breasts and Hands, 1919
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Gift of Mrs. Alma Wertheim

she did—how she dressed or how she addressed a letter—was one that O'Keeffe had embraced from the start, from her years as an art teacher on the Texas plains.[3] She was always painstaking and imaginative (to the extent circumstances permitted) about her garb and her living arrangements—hardly less meticulous or thoughtful than she was in composing her pictures. Considering that O'Keeffe deliberately established this continuum between her art and her life, perhaps we should not view as entirely problematic the longstanding tendency to conflate the identities of her body of art with her body; perhaps we would do better to look to that conflation as the source of a solution—a solution to the need for a duly serious discourse about O'Keeffe's paintings.

O'Keeffe's introduction to the general public occurred first through Stieglitz's images of her.[4] Many of those photographs were intensely erotic nudes, sometimes done after the heated love-making sessions of an enthralled pair of newly involved lovers. Many of the photographs featured O'Keeffe's figure in conjunction with her art, moreover, such that her vision was first widely revealed, through Stieglitz's lens, as the outcropping of her eminently sensual body. Some scholars have wondered why O'Keeffe submitted to Stieglitz's voracious gaze: here was an intelligent, self-possessed woman working diligently to attain a position normally denied to women—that of the autonomous, artistic subjectivity. How could such a woman have let herself be so manifestly objectified, exhibited less as the artist she was than as the artist's model she was not? The answer surely is (as Lacanian psychoanalysis or, for that matter, common sense would tell us) that O'Keeffe, like the rest of us, male and female, desired both these crucial experiences: the possibility of being a subject and that of being an object—a mere body that makes the pulse quicken in someone we love.

O'Keeffe had been as an art student repelled by life drawing classes, apparently because of the

cruel, casually exploitive act of objectification they involve, and (with one minor, early exception) she would never willingly use a human model.[5] O'Keeffe let a camera probe her body, while she would not herself probe others' bodies, because it was Stieglitz behind the camera: because the pictures issued from a vital connection between her and him; because this work was revivifying his creative life; and possibly also because it contributed to the unfolding of her own creative vision. O'Keeffe's vision—as certain of her writings and, indeed, our own eyes richly tell us—stemmed from a searching, keen, and protracted investigation of the experience of the body, in the first place her own body, in its profound embeddedness in nature.

By now it is well known that O'Keeffe truculently insisted that her work was sexual only in the minds of her viewers. But no doubt this was a ploy to put the responsibility for the often offensive interpretations of her art where it belonged. Since the interpreters of O'Keeffe's art, particularly in her heydey in the 1920s, liked to describe it in trite and gushing terms, as the pure expression of Womanhood itself—where Woman is identified with Nature and the Womb—it is entirely understandable that a bright person such as O'Keeffe should have yearned to dissociate herself from such blather. Nor did the artist prove any more receptive to the feminists who revived this clichéd terminology for a time when the women's movement was energetically recreating itself in the 1970s. No matter how different their aims—as women who hoped to reclaim the female body by formulating an essentially feminine vision through centralized motifs, labial or vaginal in inspiration (motifs often inspired by works such as *Music—Pink and Blue II*, 1919)—to O'Keeffe, the effect of being rendered as an opulently labial dinner plate by Judy Chicago could have been no less humiliating than that of having Paul Rosenfeld trumpet, in 1921: "Her art is gloriously female. Her great painful and ecstatic climaxes make us at last to know something the man has always wanted to know....The organs that differentiate the sex speak."[6] O'Keeffe knew full well that fifty years later she was still, crudely put, being called a "cunt."

Balthazar Korab

Georgia O'Keeffe's Living Room (with African Mask), Abiquiu, 1964

To study a picture as enchanting as *Flower Abstraction* of 1924, with its skillfully melded evocations of human and floral anatomy—allusions to petals and skin, to radiance and flows—is to see that O'Keeffe's sense of what it meant to explore the body was more nuanced, complex, and poetic than the reductively minded Rosenfeld or Chicago seemed able to appreciate. Although this picture, like much of O'Keeffe's work, toys with certain clichés about womanhood, at her best the artist always managed to exceed those stock notions. Isolated and boldly enlarged, knowingly stylized and framed, O'Keeffe's flowers could not be mistaken

Judy Chicago

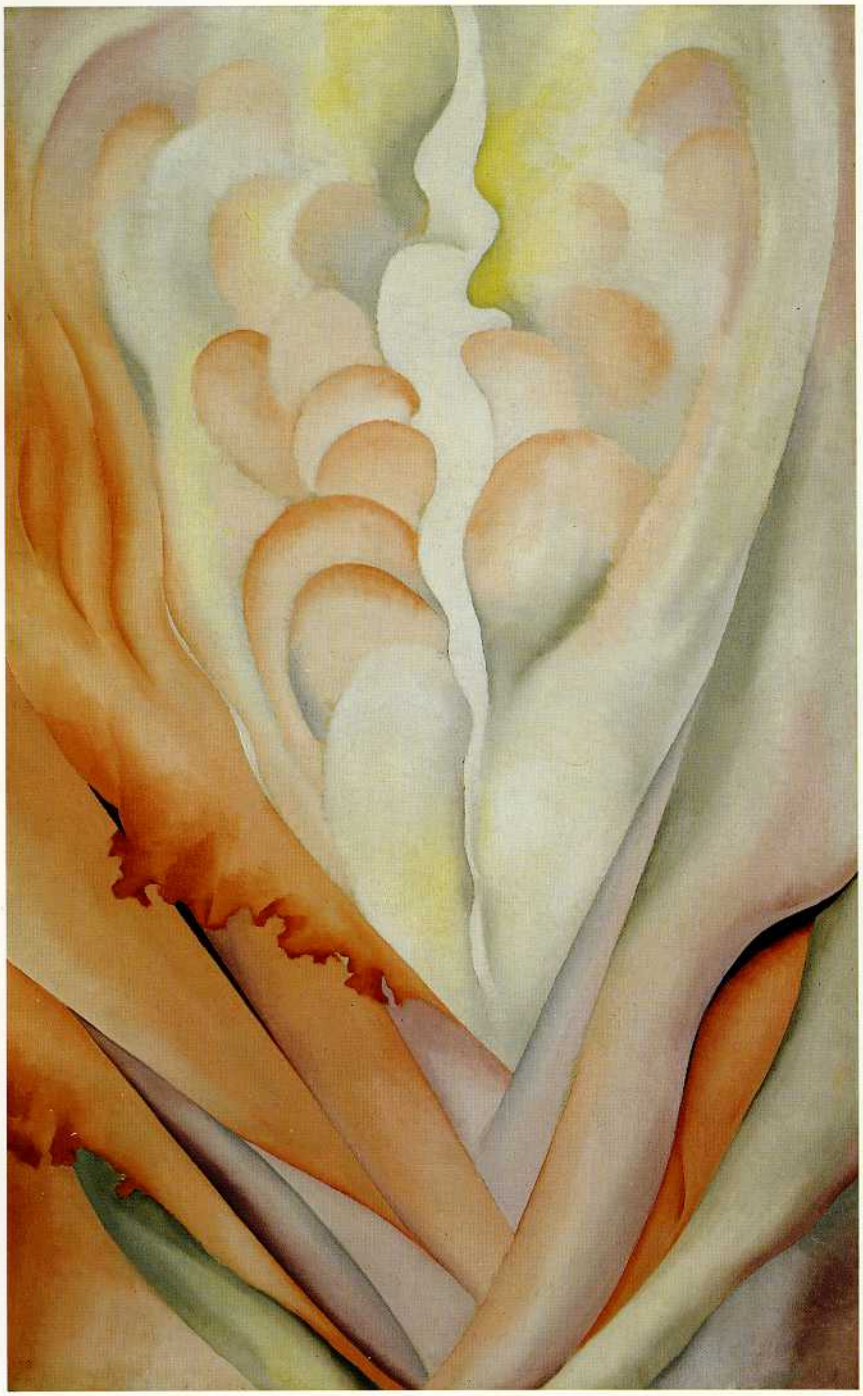
Georgia O'Keeffe, place setting from *The Dinner Party*, 1979
© Judy Chicago, 1979

for the banal bouquets of the earnest lady amateur, the prim posies of the virgin, or the garish corsages of the Jezebel. Inventive in composition and subtle in coloration, *Flower Abstraction* is an exercise in balancing and combining observed and imagined forms, in subtly adducing an atmosphere of wholesome, vibrant, sensual feeling.

O'Keeffe knew how to find the body in nature, and nature in the body; better said, she knew that there is no line between the two—that we are in and of nature, despite our habit of situating ourselves outside and above it. And perhaps that dimension of ourselves that most often or most primally reminds us of our identity as mammals, as one kind of animal among others on this planet, is that source of surpassing physical pleasure, our sexuality.

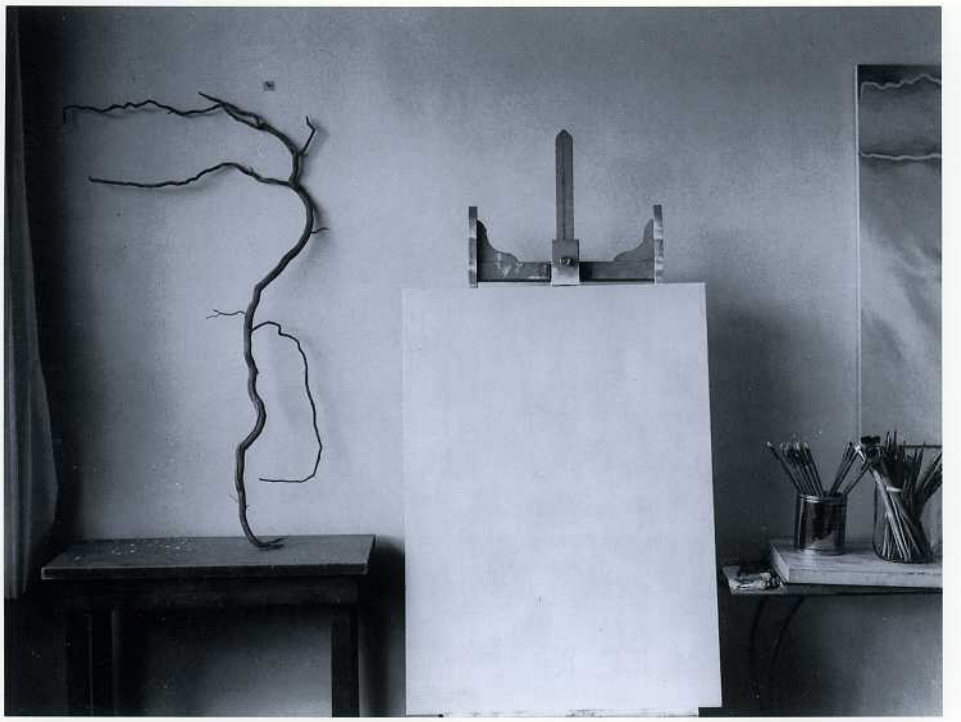
That sexuality is deeply implicated in the very formation of human identity is a concept that took root in this country in the 1920s, just when O'Keeffe matured as an artist.[7] O'Keeffe's awareness of her sexuality was of an entity not exclusively genital, but pervading the entire self and its senses—including its experience of the male body, as such abstract paeans to the sensation of penetration as *Black and White* of 1930 suggest. O'Keeffe's paintings are assertively but complexly sexual: they explore that terrain where the sexual coincides with the natural and, in a loose sense, with the spiritual.[8] O'Keeffe's body of art remains alluring, then, for the poetic and astute ways in which (without sacrificing her urbanity) she visualized her profound sense of her connectedness to nature—where nature serves as an ever-generous wellspring of inspiration, of solace, and of pleasure.

ANNA C. CHAVE



Georgia O'Keeffe

Flower Abstraction, 1924



Todd Webb

O'Keeffe's Studio, 1963

NOTES

1. O'Keeffe's first solo exhibition took place at Stieglitz's 291 gallery in April 1917; her affair with the photographer began in 1918.

2. Quoted in Benita Eisler, "Life Lines," *The New Yorker*, January 25, 1993, p. 73.

3. Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of An Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980), p. 96.

4. In 1921, Stieglitz had a big, well-attended show of his work at the Anderson Art Galleries in New York; almost a third of the pictures (forty-five photographs) were of O'Keeffe—who would not have a major exhibition of her own work until 1923.

5. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), n.p. O'Keeffe did a series of watercolors of a female nude around 1918.

6. Paul Rosenfeld, "American Painting," *The Dial*, 71 (December 1921), p. 666. Regarding the masculinist bias in the O'Keeffe literature, see my own "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America*, 78 (January 1990), pp. 114-24, 177, 179.

7. "By comparison with the past, American society in the 1920s seemed to embrace the sexual." Due to growing awareness and acceptance of the theses of modern sexologists such as Freud and Havelock Ellis, the purpose of sex was no longer seen as confined to procreative purposes, nor even to "its role in fostering intimacy between husband and wife"; increasingly, "sex was becoming a marker of identity, the wellspring of an individual's true nature." See John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 234, 225, 226.

8. This was terrain familiar to Symbolist and Symbolist-influenced artists: think of Rodin—or of Brancusi, whose work appealed to O'Keeffe, and vice versa. Regarding O'Keeffe's close relation to the Symbolist tradition, see Sarah Whitaker Peters, *Becoming O'Keeffe: The Early Years* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), chap. 3.

Georgia O'Keeffe

Black and White, 1930