

**The Beyond:
Georgia
O'Keeffe
&
Contemporary
Art**

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How do you measure an artist's impact?
The experience of an artwork is often so personal, its effects so indescribable that accounting for the impact of art and its makers can be a confounding exercise. Should you count the number of times an artist appears in art history textbooks and curricula? Or tally the number of exhibitions an artist has mounted at major museums?

By these measures, Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) unquestionably figures prominently within the American art canon. Through her early embrace of abstraction and effusive use of color, she created some of the most enduring and iconic images of twentieth-century art. But this exhibition and catalog argue that one of the most profound ways to measure an artist's impact is not through her ubiquity, but her influence on subsequent artists. Exploring this artistic influence, *The Beyond: Georgia O'Keeffe and Contemporary Art* demonstrates that the questions she asked in her paintings still endure, finding expression through the hands of artists working all over the country.

As curators of contemporary art, we see a lot of artwork: in galleries, other museums, artist-run spaces, artists' studios. Together, we began to notice themes, images, and approaches that seemed to recall the mother of American Modernism. Enlarged floral forms. Luscious, even lascivious color. Spare compositions moving towards abstraction. The same elements that make O'Keeffe's painting instantly recognizable to the general public have influenced a younger generation of artists. This exhibition presents groundbreaking works from O'Keeffe's long career, drawing on the Crystal Bridges collection along with other public and private collections, to span the full range of her output. Grouped by theme, the O'Keeffe works appear alongside art by twenty contemporary artists that evokes, interrogates, and elaborates upon the images and approaches that mark O'Keeffe's oeuvre. The resulting exhibition demonstrates the ongoing relevance of O'Keeffe's work as a touchstone for working artists, showing the continuing connections between our collective history and our present. This exhibition does not attempt to make one-to-one comparisons between O'Keeffe and the contemporary artists included. Rather, we hope that the work of this group of artists expands upon conversations and themes O'Keeffe presented in her work and her life, creating new pathways for understanding her wide-ranging artistic output.

One further hope we have for this exhibition: that O’Keeffe’s enduring legacy helps to introduce a wider audience to the work of this particular group of living artists. Visitors to *The Beyond* may approach the exhibition with a general understanding of O’Keeffe; they may, for instance, be aware of her large-scale paintings of flowers, or have seen her images of starkly beautiful animal skulls situated in desert landscapes. But they may not be aware of an emerging generation of artists finding parallel possibilities in their own explorations of landscape, or echoing O’Keeffe in exploring the elastic potential of abstract painting. Experiencing these works together in the gallery, visitors can make these connections: seeing O’Keeffe’s work in a new way, at the same time that they are discovering artists to follow, to engage with, and to support.

Flowers and Other Still Lives

“I decided that if I could paint that flower in a huge scale, you could not ignore its beauty.”

The flower paintings are perhaps O’Keeffe’s most recognizable body of work. They convey immediacy and vivacity through their massive scale and radical cropping; she transformed the everyday prettiness of floral forms into audacious, primordial expressions of natural beauty. O’Keeffe’s impulse to enlarge and emphasize the flower came from observing the rapidly changing cityscape of New York: “I realized that were I to paint the same flowers so small, no one would look at them because I was unknown. So I thought I’ll make them big like the huge buildings going up. People will be startled—they’ll have to look at them—and they did.”¹ Her flower paintings emerged in the context of the Roaring Twenties, a time when the construction of modern skyscrapers attracted significant attention from the media and the public. O’Keeffe’s flowers were her out-sized, organic response to an emerging architectural vocabulary of machines and steel. At the same time, she recognized their power as an individual statement: a means to emerge from artistic obscurity, to become less “unknown.”

The confounding power of O’Keeffe’s flowers comes, at least in part, from the various competing associations that flowers call up. Flowers have appeared in artistic expression since time immemorial, in portraits, still lifes, and other images, often symbolizing specific abstract concepts, such as love, purity, or beauty, according to the flower type. But O’Keeffe’s flowers, radically simplified and devoid of context, exist in a much more ambiguous zone of

meaning. Perhaps uncomfortable with this ambiguity, early critics in Sigmund Freud–crazed New York circles were quick to assign a sexual meaning to the pictures, finding structural parallels with female genitalia. The artist dismissed this interpretation, but it continues to cling fast to the work—perhaps to the point of foreclosing other more useful readings.

Alongside contemporary work by artists like Wardell Milan, Jennifer Packer, Britny Wainwright, and Louise Jones, O’Keeffe’s flowers open up again to new interpretive possibilities. Like O’Keeffe, Wardell Milan also takes a centrally positioned single flower as his subject in *Stunted Blue* (2016). For him, the flower’s meaning is entangled with that of social history; his paintings of tulips, for instance, reveal his interest in the seventeenth-century Dutch phenomenon of “tulipomania,” which is generally considered the world’s first speculative economic bubble. In their lush dynamism, Milan’s flowers ask us to examine beauty in full view of its other, darker corollaries, acknowledging “the potential for danger and decay within the ineffably exquisite,” as he has suggested. Likewise, Jennifer Packer’s blooms expose a somber reality beneath their expressively rendered surfaces: these are funerary bouquets, painted to honor black victims of police violence. For Packer, the flowers convey the strange, ineffable loss of someone you never personally knew, yet whose absence strikes you deeply. Packer’s flowers, while mournful, are also searing statements about the ongoing vulnerability of the black body in America.



Wardell Milan
Stunted Blue
p. 48

Britny Wainwright’s flower motifs likewise target contemporary social concerns. In her ceramic sculptures, she deploys floral patterns derived from textiles and wallpaper to interrogate notions of femininity that are traditionally associated with domestic space. In *Enduring Blossom* (2017), for example, glazed earthenware flowers cover the yellow canvas surface of a floor-bound, human-sized organic form. Liberated from the two-dimensionality of wallpaper, these flowers assume rigid erectness and power—traits normally associated with masculinity—even as they retain their inherent curvilinear, feminine sensibility. Like O’Keeffe, Wainwright finds enduring power in organic forms that have been traditionally coded as feminine.



Britny Wainwright
Enduring Blossom
p. 49

Floral form and decorative patterning also provide the punch in Anna Valdez’s lush hothouse paintings of her studio interior. Following a rigorous daily practice, Valdez paints a rotating cast of studio characters directly from life: unfurling patterned fabrics, stacks of art books, leafy potted plants and perky succulents. Liberated from the constraints of strict realism, her paintings nonetheless capture the casual, dynamic environment of the studio. The artist’s close, repeated observation of specific forms echoes O’Keeffe’s similar investment in rigorous observation. At the same time, Valdez’s playful embrace of exuberant patterns sets her apart from the Modernist master. Such a vigorous

assertion of conventionally decorative motifs finds expression, too, in Louise Jones's explosive flower murals, which blossom with vitality and saturated color. Jones's approach to painting flowers and plant matter stems from her personal interest in exploring the femininity she finds in the floral form, which reminds her of her own body. Flowers also serve as a means for the artist to explore pure shape and color beyond the specificity of a particular species; depending on the project, some images are borrowed from real flowers, while others are imagined or drawn from memory.

Finding the Figure

“I feel there is something unexplored about woman that only a woman can explore.”

Femininity, of course, remains a charged concept when considering O'Keeffe's career. From her early days as the subject of Alfred Stieglitz's erotic photographic eye, O'Keeffe and her work have been closely associated with the female form, and audiences still see the feminine coded into her paintings. But a discussion of O'Keeffe's depiction of the human figure must go deeper, as the figure in O'Keeffe's work, in its oscillation between occasional presence and conspicuous, sometimes eerie absence, nonetheless remains important to our understanding of the pictures. The artists we've included here deploy the human figure as potentially evocative subject matter, sometimes substituting radical presence in the face of O'Keeffe's desolate absence. With his handcrafted sculptures, Matthew Ronay consistently pushes traditional media and materials into new territory, often leaving the viewer wondering not only how the object was made, but what he used to make it. The semi-abstract, biomorphic forms recall the organic shapes of the human body even as they refute that correlation. The flirtatious figures in Monica Kim Garza's playful paintings vamp, preen, and pose for the viewer in a manner emphasizing empowerment over subjugation. In paintings like *Painters Club* (2016/2017), for example, Garza depicts unclothed female bodies as confident, active subjects, exuding creative force through their activities (in this case, painting a still life of flowers in a vase). Likewise, Tschabalala Self's sewn piecemeal compositions find queenly beauty in everyday female sexuality. Her figures, which she calls “avatars,” are related to the artist and her experience of the world as a black woman, while eluding a strictly autobiographical interpretation. As Self has said, “The figures, they're not necessarily



Monica Kim Garza
Painters Club
p. 68

performing anything for the viewers; I want them just to be. They're living their own lives." In so doing, they invite the viewer to contend with such an image, to enjoy it while acknowledging the figure's hidden revolutionary power and agency.

Cities and Deserts

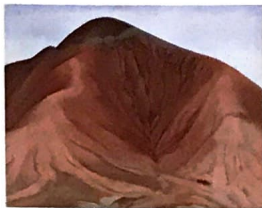
“One can't paint New York as it is,
but rather as it is felt.”

“It was all so far away—there was quiet
and an untouched feel to the country,
and I could work as I pleased.”

Two of O'Keeffe's great subjects were thousands of miles apart: the skyscrapers of New York City and the rolling deserts of New Mexico. O'Keeffe made her paintings of New York buildings from 1925 to 1929, while living with her new husband Stieglitz on the 30th floor of the Shelton Hotel. With expansive views in three directions, the apartment inspired O'Keeffe to try “to paint New York,” though she “was told that it was an impossible idea—even the men hadn't done too well with it.”² Her renderings, which reduce the buildings to soft-edge geometry and gradients of color, sought to capture the city's essence, which she described as “something bigger, grander, more complex than ever before in history.”³ Such aspirations underpin her desert paintings, too; she left New York in 1929, the year of the Wall Street crash and the beginning of the Great Depression, for Mabel Dodge Luhan's ranch in Taos, New Mexico. There, she began to depict the visual rhythms of the desert, finding again the bigger, grander, more complex forms that would preoccupy her for decades to follow.



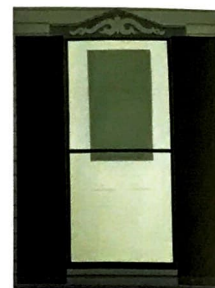
Georgia O'Keeffe
*Radiator Building—
Night, New York*
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Georgia O'Keeffe
Small Purple Hills
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In a grouping that responds to *Radiator Building—Night, New York* (1927) and *Small Purple Hills* (1934), working artists demonstrate a similar investment in cityscapes and desert landscapes to convey complex meaning and feeling. Like O'Keeffe, Mark Lewis unearths the cultural codes embedded within the structural fabric of the city. Lewis's graphite and paper collage streetscapes, made on location at the sites they depict through a laborious process, capture the dynamism and energy of daily life in his hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Negar Ahkami's hyper-expressive paintings contain a wide range of global references, including Iran's ceramic architectural traditions and New York City street art from the 1980s. Sharona Eliassaf's colorful paintings also demonstrate a global reach, reflecting the artist's trips between New York City and Israel, which she has been

making since childhood. Eliassaf's imagined landscapes marry the language of television gameshows, whose backdrops are instantly recognizable in her work, with the geometric rhythm of city skylines. Andy Robert's large-scale cityscapes of the Harlem streets blur the line between realism and abstraction, offering an impressionistic view of shopworn signs and advertisements. Quite unlike O'Keeffe's spare, nearly abstract compositions of the desert, Caroline Larsen's meticulously crafted oil paintings of pools in the California desert show nature as corralled for the purposes of human leisure. Like O'Keeffe's desert paintings, Cynthia Daignault's serial-painted pictures take place in the expansive American landscape, simultaneously exploring the edges of country and identity. Milano Chow's use of architecture in her graphite, ink, Flashe, and photo-transfer drawings have a timeless quality that converses with O'Keeffe's cityscapes and still lifes, including *Farmhouse Window and Door* (1929). Dylan Gebbia-Richards's sprayed-wax installations act as landscapes, serving as meditations on the natural world. His colorful painting constructions are formed, as he puts it, by the same physical laws that dictate how desert bluffs erode, rivers carve out deltas, and uplift forms mountains. Finding transcendence within the natural world, he shares the meditative tone of O'Keeffe's experience of the desert.



Georgia O'Keeffe
*Farmhouse Window
and Door*
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The Intangible Thing

“The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint.”

“Nothing is less real than Realism. Details are confusing. Only by selecting, omitting, and emphasizing do we advance to the true meaning of things.”

At her best, O'Keeffe teetered on the cusp of representation and abstraction, leaving her paintings open to a universe of possible meaning while still being rooted in the recognizable visual world. Artists today continue to mine this tension in their work, following in the footsteps of O'Keeffe and her Modernist contemporaries, while at the same time finding new possibilities in vocabularies beyond the traditional Western canon. Loie Hollowell's finely painted abstract reliefs recall O'Keeffe's paintings in their style and facture, but open outward to contemporary concerns about the female body and

triumphant sexuality. Molly Larkey pulls abstract sculpture into the realm of social practice with her installations, sparking conversations about alternative social and economic structures. Pearl C. Hsiung's large-scale sculptures depict the power of the natural terrain by blending the language of traditional landscape painting with abstraction. Kim Keever's photographs made with an equal understanding of art and science live in the space between landscape and abstraction that O'Keeffe knew so well.

The other two essays in this volume, by Anna Chave and Alicia Inez Guzman, further contextualize the images included in the ensuing pages, expanding on some of the ideas raised in the exhibition. Guzman's essay "Influence at a Distance" examines the long-term impact of O'Keeffe and her work through select artists in the exhibition, while Chave reconsiders O'Keeffe's Americanness through the lens of the artist's writings, travels, and subjects. Taking new approaches to their subjects while spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these authors bridge the historical and the contemporary, much like the exhibition itself.

The title of the exhibition, *The Beyond*, comes from O'Keeffe's last unassisted oil painting, which she completed in 1972. An abstract fugue of blue, black, and gray horizontal layers punctuated by a ribbon of white, the painting suggests a distant horizon, either darkening or lightening. Feathery brushstrokes of lighter blue emanate from the white line, reminiscent of distant billowing clouds. O'Keeffe had lost her central vision in the previous year, and she painted this work using only her peripheral sight. "The beyond" in this picture might represent what then remained just beyond the realm of her perception, what stood at the approaching horizon. At 84 years of age, she must have been thinking, too, of what lay beyond her time on earth. In her wide-ranging practice over her long career, O'Keeffe honed a distinctive vision, finding ethereal beauty and wonder in our everyday world. The working artists sharing space with O'Keeffe in this exhibition continue pursuing their own horizons, taking her forms and feelings to new ends under the same ever-lightening sky.

¹ Katherine Kuh, "Georgia O'Keeffe," in *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Modern Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962): 190.

² Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).

³ B. Vladimir Berman, "She Painted the Lily and Got \$25,000 and Fame for Doing It," *New York Evening Graphic Magazine* Section, May 12, 1928.