

## **Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction**

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York September 17, 2009 – January 17, 2010. Travels to The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

*I feel that a real living form is the natural result of the individual's effort to create the living thing out of the adventure of his spirit into the unknown – where it has experienced something – felt something – it has not understood – and from that experience comes the desire to make the unknown – known.*

*Georgia O'Keeffe, 1976*

Abstraction and the bravery it took to embrace and intently explore it, when she began in 1915, sets O'Keeffe at the front of American modernist artists and artists around the world. It was the beginning of many revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in 1912 Kandinsky had painted the first completely abstract oil painting and Malevich in 1915 painted Black Square. We're talking cutting edge folks; an international avant-garde.

Like many educated women of her time, O'Keeffe wore little or no make-up, and as an artist she strove to be herself, clear and unique. A champion of individuality, she was a pioneer in art by the fact of being a woman artist. She undertook and sustained the tremendous effort it takes to achieve a vision and a self. Distinctively feminine and honest, she expressed purposefully to the public that her work was that of a woman, and the ineffable in nature and the universe.

In the United States women did not have the right to vote in 1915. It took a Constitutional Amendment to achieve this basic right; that was the Nineteenth, and it was ratified in 1920. Defining the modern woman was a sweeping international concern that was discussed at every level of society, debated publicly and written about in all the newspapers of the times. What directions might women in the modern world take ?

One of the gifts this exhibition offers in assembling 125 oil paintings and series of works on paper from key periods of her oeuvre, is to give access to those marvelous painterly surfaces. No reproductions, which have diluted the importance of her contribution to modern art, could ever have the force and impact of actually seeing these luminously smooth oil paintings. The only sculpture in the exhibition is a sublime matte white painted bronze, that invites the hand to feel it, but alas no closure is possible. O'Keeffe's intelligent and sensuous simplification, and importantly her development in serial works, range from rendered places or objects, plants or natural in origin (which through referential are never realistic), to deeply felt abstractions. A purifying mastery of vision, experience, color, shape and volume are rendered in her impenetrable space.

There is no substitute to get the subtle and profound experience of O'Keeffe's vision; you have to see the original works. The aura of her paintings have not dissipated at all in over 80 years; they are still alive, as when she painted them.

*The meaning of a word – to me – is not as exact as the meaning of a color.  
Color and shapes make a more definite statement than words.*

*Georgia O’Keeffe, 1976*

Thanks are due to the co-curators: Barbara Haskell, of the Whitney Museum of American Art; Barbara Buhler Lynes, curator at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Emily Fisher Landau Director of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum Research Center, Bruce Robertson professor of the history of art and architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, guest curator at the Phillips Collection, also professor and vice provost for the arts at the University of Virginia.

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O’Keeffe Museum <http://www.okeeffemuseum.org/>  
Wikipedia\_ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia\\_O’Keeffe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_O’Keeffe)

**IMAGE TO USE: Jack-in-the-pulpit No. IV, 1930m and  
good shot of her face**

Text\_ L. Brandon Krall © NYC September 2009