

**Recontextualizing Women In Modern Art:  
The Sexualization of Georgia O'Keeffe**

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ART 600- Regional Modernism

2023

The history of women- women in regards to art as well as a collective story of the world- has always been perceived through the lens of men. The idealized female, the exaggerated woman, the emotional girl; all depicted through the light of individuals who are unaware of the true nature of what being a woman entails. Historically, as well as currently, the unequal perception of women is at the forefront of femme minds; will the weeping mother be seen as disillusioned? Will the angry teen be redacted to menstruating irrationality? Will the strong-willed woman be seen as an unwilling and difficult communal participant? These, among many others, are the initial thoughts of women from all walks of life across the globe, and surely have been for quite some time. While seemingly all creative processes should be exempt from these perceptions, female artists fall into the continuous challenges of being perceived through the male lens. Painter, photographer, and great American artist Georgia O'Keeffe was no stranger to these constraints. Her life, and work (specifically her Precisionist style floral works), were minimalized to the sexual natures of her gender. While these works were originally what set her apart from other artists of her time, this stated sexualization is certainly a large contribution to the way modern individuals see and interpret the paintings. Necessary is the reapproach to understanding her work as a whole, without these limitations placed upon her paintings. Thankfully, in a form of subtle ownership during the time of illusionary male superiority, O'Keeffe depicts a necessary and reflective feminist narrative to her audience via her works created beginning in the mid 1920s.

To preface, while all women may experience varying forms of sexualization (consensual or non-consensual), Georgia O'Keeffe as an individual seemed to be a

consistent form of study in this regard, for photographer and lover, Alfred Steiglitz. Beginning in 1917 in the early stages of their relationship, O’Keeffe began posing for her partner (and later husband) in various and sometimes suggestive positions that led to an obsessive project, full of a “kind of heat and excitement” that led to the execution of over 300 photographs of her.<sup>1</sup> The work left no skin unphotographed, no boundary left unexploited, and no form of self left for O’Keeffe to keep private, had she wished. Her hands were no longer tools to create her masterpieces, but the subject of a man’s photograph. Her breasts were no longer a proud tribute to womanhood, but a display of desire. The private happenings of what happened in her studio were laid bare for all of Stieglitz’s viewers to see. There was no concern for O’Keeffe’s privacy; and though immodesty was not the issue, surely the continuous documentation of oneself had to lead to inquiries about one’s personal desires and dreams, ambitions and awareness. Certainly, it would be difficult to establish yourself, as well as understand yourself truthfully, while under the lens of someone else’s microscope. While inherently open to her own sexuality “in opening up the possibility for the representation of women as agents of their own desire, she opened up new possibilities as well for male sexuality”.<sup>2</sup> It appears that these photographs made it impossible for O’Keeffe to embrace her authentic and natural sexuality, without the opinions and sexual pressures of men. Quite unfortunately, this acceptance of being photographed greatly contributed to the neverending decisions to reduce O’Keeffe (and therefore women as a whole) to the specifications of sexualization.

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe, *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Portrait* (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Anna C Chave, “O’Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze” (Art in America, January 1990).

Furthermore, it is also questionable how respect played a role in the relationship of two artists, one of whom showcased and exhibited the nude photographs of the other, lesser known and less respected in an industry both were equally devoted to. In a National Public Radio programing with Susan Stamberg, we are able to gather how greatly their status differed. "Stieglitz was the most important person in the New York art world,' explains Greenough, head of the photography department at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. 'And O'Keeffe was a schoolteacher' — teaching art in Texas."<sup>3</sup> Was the sexual representation of O'Keeffe produced by Stieglitz then a predecessor to how her works to come would be viewed, as well as the value set upon them? Would it even be possible to view her paintings without a thought of female sexualization, after most people who would see her work, had also seen her naked body? Arguably no amount of hard work, or endless hours painting in her studio would change the now sexualized connotation of her work. Due to this, it is an unfortunate reality to recognize that O'Keeffe's work then, has never truly been respected at the level the work deserves. In an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in a showing of works carefully crafted by O'Keeffe, we know that "O'Keeffe's work is rarely afforded serious critical treatment".<sup>4</sup> She had never been referred to as a true contemporary artist at the level of her co-eds, and following, never had a critique equivalent to the level of paintings produced; this is the heartbreaking and cyclical reality for women and artists everywhere. This disadvantageous position is quite possibly an outcome of the challenges that came alongside the more risque

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Stamberg, "Stieglitz and O'Keeffe: Their Love and Life in Letters," NPR, July 21, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/07/21/138467808/stieglitz-and-okeeffe-their-love-and-life-in-letters>.

<sup>4</sup> Chave, 115

photographs taken of her by an individual she was hopeful to trust. Dishearteningly, the works of O’Keeffe, after being photographed by Steiglitz, never had the chance to become works not related to sex.

In an effort to continue establishing her career, away from the lens of Steiglitz, O’Keeffe’s floral works that began in the mid 1920s, were a spectacle of how pioneering American Precisionists allowed their creations to come to life. Her careful color palette, decisive movements and detailed, zoomed-in approach were all created in a sense of revisitation to old interests with a personal and modern approach. Seemingly, it was not a goal to depict female genitalia, nor to sexualize her paintings; and while it was also not the goal to achieve realism, it is known that part of her objective was to “merely assert her own expressive creativity upon its original beauty”.<sup>5</sup> The floral works of O’Keeffe blossomed into works that were notably her own in a style that belonged to America. Paintings such as *Two Calla Lilies on Pink* and *Black Iris* (see Images 1 and 2) however, became a common interpretation of the female sex. Folding petals of the iris became representative of vaginal anatomy, and the pistil of the lilies became similar to erect nipples. Paul Rosenfeld, a critic who reviewed O’Keeffe’s work put it: “no man could feel as Georgia O’Keeffe and utter himself in precisely such curves and colors; for in those curves and spots and prismatic color there is also a woman referring to the universe of her own frame”.<sup>6</sup> However this relationship was not one that O’Keeffe herself intended. Simply put, the sexualization placed upon her work by critics- such as Paul Rosenfeld- as well as the input of other male perspectives in her life- such as

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<sup>5</sup> “Georgia O’Keeffe Flower Paintings,” Flower Paintings by Georgia O’Keeffe, accessed October 2023, <https://www.georgiaokeeffe.org/flowers/>.

<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Tufts, *American Women Artists, 1830-1930* (Washington, D.C.: International Exhibitions Foundation for the National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1987).

Alfred Steiglitz- created an illusionary story of what the works aimed to represent.

“Many have interpreted O’Keeffe’s depictions of floral anatomy in relation to sexuality and gender, but the artist always resisted these interpretations, considering them too specific and limiting”.<sup>7</sup> There is now a common misconception among modern viewers that this subtle depiction is one of complete certainty. However O’Keeffe believed, as well as proved, that her ideas were greater than the limitations of sex and gender.

While these floral paintings are certainly O’Keeffe’s best known works it is also important to note that she was also capable of many more subjects, and often depicted them from her unique point of view- though they were not as well received by her predominantly male audience. When creating her perspective on New York skyscrapers (see Image 3: *Shelton with Sunspots*) and the way the light danced around the buildings, her paintings were shot down by none other than her husband, Alfred Steiglitz. He refused to exhibit them as they were not properly conforming to his ideas of female art, and he encouraged O’Keeffe to paint something he deemed more feminine. “Steiglitz discouraged O’Keeffe’s innovations throughout her career, including her decision to render that priapic icon, the skyscraper”, but encouraged her to work in a floral language, something he had deemed a womanly subject.<sup>8</sup> From these subject rejections, arose O’Keeffe’s depiction of flora and fauna. However, again, these subjects were not exempt from further sexualization from Stieglitz, American critics, and art historians alike. Unfortunately, it seems to be a recurring theme in the life of O’Keeffe, that her story, her body, and her works fall victim to the ramifications of gender specific normalities.

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<sup>7</sup> Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Two Calla Lilies on Pink,” Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed October 2023, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/83649>.

<sup>8</sup> Chave, 120



Image 1: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Iris*, 1926, oil on canvas



Image 2: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Two Calla Lilies on Pink*, 1928, oil on canvas



Image 3: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Shelton with Sunspots*, 1926, oil on canvas

More notable than the injustices of sexualization, is the feminist narrative that arose from O'Keeffe's work. Feminism in its right, is the socio-political advocacy of women's rights on the basis of equality of the sexes. Outwardly, the floral works of Georgia O'Keeffe present as a detailed description of her subjects, rather than the sexual status put upon the work that O'Keeffe herself disagreed with. But regardless of intention put onto her paintings by the men in her cohort- O'Keeffe continued to paint the work that was important to her; work that was necessary to her practice. In this sense, O'Keeffe's greatest contribution to feminism "wasn't in terms of advocacy or petitioning, but rather in the ways she devoted her whole life to making art, which still continues to inspire creativity that can lead to feminist activism" (Grasso). O'Keeffe lived a life full of art, regardless of the ridiculousness of men and their constant desire for sexualization, no matter the context. The refusal to allow gender to affect the outcome



and the way you conduct life, can certainly be considered one of the most feminist approaches to the human experience. She was an individual destined to create works that solely represented her experiences and her vision. It is greatly disappointing then, that the female perspective is still not taken seriously. Women- including O'Keeffe- are underrepresented and under shown even by today's standards; "In London, the National Gallery's collection is made up of just one percent of women artists" (Hessel). A devastating statistic surely, but a statistic far too familiar. O'Keeffe was frequently exhibited alongside her male counterparts, frequently compared to their works, yet never seen as an equal. This "logic" is still reflected today in our representation of women artists everywhere. But regardless of the disadvantages women artists face, through their craft they can truly represent the essence of feminism, especially by following in the footsteps of O'Keeffe and her refusal to stop creating work, no matter the parameters placed upon them by society.

In the end, it can be factually said that Georgia O'Keeffe was not only a pioneer for modern American art, but also a powerhouse, a feminist, a woman unafraid of her own sexuality, a fresh perspective as well as a new standard for women everywhere. She helped shape the ideals and future generations of women and creators alike. Regardless of the constraints of man and the sexualization from a society hoping to reduce her work to themes of sex and gender, O'Keeffe produced countless works that led to the success of modern American art. Art that inspired and inspires women globally and in a variety of mediums. She has taught children, teens and adults to fully embrace the challenges and hardships of being constrained to a stereotype. O'Keefe's feminist narrative emerging from her 1920's floral works, continues to encourage the

greater population of women to push forward, regardless of outward judgment applied by anyone of any gender.

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