

BOOK REVIEW

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Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters by Jack Cowart and Juan Hamilton with letters selected and annotated by Sarah Greenough. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987. 306 pp.

IN SPITE OF the distance American artist Georgia O'Keeffe put between herself and the public, and perhaps, in part, because of it, there has long been a fascination with her person. She has been variously depicted and described: as a femme fatale, the erotic subject of Alfred Stieglitz's photography, and a painter of female sexuality and eroticism (Stieglitz himself—her lover, and then her husband—was to have remarked upon seeing O'Keeffe's drawings for the first time, "Finally a woman on paper."); then later as a mysterious, almost legendary personage, a recluse living in isolation in the desert region of New Mexico, distant, humorless and severe in her person, a woman who clothed herself in black or white, her skin lined and wrinkled, and her hair pulled back tightly on her head, as severe as New Mexico itself; and as a feminist.

The 1987-88 centennial exhibition of O'Keeffe's work at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and the 306-page book which accompanies the exhibit, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters*, reveal O'Keeffe as more than all these images, and go a long way toward illuminating her art and her person—her ways of seeing and painting her world. The book includes reproductions of the 120 pieces in the exhibition, some which have never been exhibited previously, as well as 125 letters O'Keeffe wrote during her lifetime, none of which have ever before been published.

The works in the exhibition were selected by co-curators Juan Hamilton and Jack Cowart from public and private collections, including O'Keeffe's estate, and span the years 1915 to 1965 (50 years of her 70-year career as an artist), when, as Cowart notes, O'Keeffe

was making “her greatest contributions to art and our vision.” This survey includes charcoals and pencil drawings on paper, but most of the exhibition space is devoted to her work in color—water colors and pastels on paper, and oils on canvas. These range in size from the 9 x 6" *Peach and Glass* to the phenomenal 96 x 288" *Sky Above Clouds IV* (inspired by O’Keeffe’s travels by plane), a painting of roughly rectangular, elongated white clouds receding into a blue-colored distance, merging with the horizon, and then finally with a lighter blue, then rose-colored sky.

The works in the exhibition, as Cowart also notes, were selected on the basis of their kinship in visual spirit and compositional sense, and in the perfection of their execution, and include both figurative and nonfigurative pieces: abstractions; sunsets and stars; cityscapes; close-ups of fruit and flowers; animal bones, rocks and cow skulls; doorways and windows, churches and patios; far-reaching landscapes; blue sky as framed by and viewed through a cow pelvis bone; the yellow, red and grey hills and other land formations, and distant horizon lines of the desert Southwest, as well as its overpowering sky and clouds; and skyscapes leading off into nowhere. In looking at these pieces, we are reminded that O’Keeffe found her inspiration in land and nature, places and things, rather than in people. The few figure studies which appear in the exhibition, she painted early in her career—and even these seem to resemble her later flower studies and landscapes. We also sense, in looking at her work, that O’Keeffe created something in her art that is alive and mysterious, and that transcends both O’Keeffe and her subjects—a mystical or spiritual communion between her and them.

The reproductions of O’Keeffe’s works in the exhibition book are of very fine quality, revealing brushstrokes and canvas textures where O’Keeffe chose to reveal them, and vivid color—and how important this is to O’Keeffe’s work, for her use of color is amazing. And indeed, in a letter to William Milliken (November, 1930), she said that for her, color is equivalent to life:

Color is one of the great things in the world that makes life worth living to me and as I have come to think of painting it is my effort to create with paint color for the world—life as I see it

It was at the suggestion of Juan Hamilton, co-curator of the exhibit and companion to O’Keeffe during her last 13 years, that some of O’Keeffe’s letters were also included in this exhibition book. Sarah Greenough, research curator at the National Gallery, selected the 125 letters from over 350, annotating them, and grouping them according to four periods in O’Keeffe’s life: 1915-1918, when she was an art teacher in Virginia, South Carolina and Texas; 1919-1929, when she

lived with Stieglitz in New York; 1929-1946, a period of time when she became more attached to the Southwest, and broke with the way of life in New York City and the east coast; and 1947-1981, when, after Stieglitz's death, she moved to and took up residence in New Mexico permanently.

These letters, published now two years after O'Keeffe's death at the age of 98—to Stieglitz, artist friends and others—offer us new perspectives on O'Keeffe, as an artist and a person. Her writing is spontaneous and alive. She links her thoughts with dashes and flourishes in an almost stream-of-consciousness manner, using short phrases and incomplete sentences, with no commas or apostrophes, or even periods until the very end of a letter, and sometimes not even then. In reading them, we experience, and are witness to that same tremendous exuberance, and those same mystical communions with nature and land we sense and see in her paintings:

—With the dawn my first morning here [in New Mexico] I had to laugh to myself— it seemed as if all the trees and wide flat stretch in front of them—all warm with the autumn grass—and the unchanging mountain behind the valley all moved right into my room with me—I was very amused—

It is a very beautiful world here—

(From a letter to William Howard Schubart, October, 1950)

More importantly, these letters offer us insight into O'Keeffe, and an opportunity to break through the myths, the mystique and mystery that have built up around her. We see O'Keeffe was a warm and open person, and that she was passionately in love with Stieglitz, with life and the world. Her inaccessibility to the public was necessary for her being—as a person and as an artist, just as the southwest was (“ . . . the Mountain calls one and the desert—and the sagebrush—the country seems to call one in a way that one has to answer it—” —from a letter to Dorothy Brett, April, 1930). We see she was an artist passionate about her art throughout her life, that she lived for it, and often speculated about it, and about Art; we simply do not see her as the distant, humorless and severe recluse as she has so often been depicted.

We can take pleasure, as readers, in immersing ourselves in either section of this exhibition book—in O'Keeffe's art or her letters, and we can also observe how each section illuminates the other, and thereby the life of O'Keeffe. We can, for instance, look at O'Keeffe's painting of *The Lawrence Tree* (1929) on D. H. Lawrence's ranch in New Mexico—in rich browns, greens and blues, then juxtapose it with a letter she wrote in August the same year to Rebecca Strand:

—I also got a painting of the big pine tree as you see it lying on that table under it at night—it looks as tho it is standing on its head with all the stars around—

And there are many other instances where O'Keeffe's letters illuminate her paintings, and her paintings her letters.

O'Keeffe's art and letters are complemented by essays written by each of the co-curators of the exhibit, who observe O'Keeffe with great warmth: Jack Cowart writes about O'Keeffe's art and O'Keeffe as an artist; and Juan Hamilton, himself a sculptor and potter, relates anecdotes, presumably told to him by O'Keeffe, about her life, and her relationship with Stieglitz and others. He also writes about his own experience living in O'Keeffe's world, offering insight into O'Keeffe as a person and as an artist, and giving evidence of their great friendship. The essays in turn are complemented by other images of O'Keeffe: 11 black and white photographs of her by photographers Stieglitz, Laura Gilpin and others.

O'Keeffe remarked once, in her book *Georgia O'Keeffe* (which Juan Hamilton helped her put together in 1976), that people should not be concerned with the intricacies of her life, but with what she had accomplished artistically: "Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest." O'Keeffe was most likely referring to the legends that had grown up around her, and consumed the public's interest more than her art and she as an artist had. In this book and exhibition, we are offered the opportunity to rediscover what O'Keeffe has done with where she has been, and to come closer to discovering O'Keeffe as an artist and a person—her ways of seeing and painting her world.