SUMMER DAYS

by

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Although best known for her floral paintings, American Artist Georgia O’Keeffe cared for more than subjects of flowers and sunshine. In contrast to O’Keeffe’s iconic flower paintings, which have been recognized as possessing feminine, sensual, and delicate characteristics, her 1936 painting, *Summer Days* (fig. 1) offers a new subject matter and tone. This is important, because, despite the public’s generalized ideas of O’Keeffe as a fluid and gentle, dainty flower painter, O’Keeffe proves her brush stroke is not limited to what has been coined as ‘feminine’ subject matter. This change challenges how she was originally perceived and the preconceived labels and personas artificially attributed to her name and career. *Summer Days* divulges into a harsher narrative of a barren desert scene struck by the skull of a deer suspended amid a smoky, white washed sky.

*Summer Days* offers a new perspective of O’Keeffe’s artistic interest in subject matter, as the associated symbolism and metaphoric presences of the elements depicted in the painting form the narrative. Starting in 1930, O’Keeffe first began featuring animal skulls in her work. Prior to this date, no such subject matter was seen; yet following the 1930 date O’Keeffe begins depicting animal skulls and carcasses somewhat frequently in her works. The featured bones were typically linked to horses, cows, rams, and deer. Works depicting related subject matter include, the early 1930 painting of *The Horse’s Skull on Blue*, followed by the 1931 paintings of *Cow’s Skull: Red, White, and Blue,* (fig. 2), *Cow’s Skull with Calico Roses,* and *Horse’s Skull with Pink Rose;* the *Ram’s Head, White Hollyhock-Hills,* completed in 1935 (fig. 3); *Deers Skull With Pedernal,* 1936 (fig. 4); *From the Faraway, Nearby,* 1937 (fig. 5); and *Ram’s Head, Blue Morning Glory,* 1938 (fig. 6).
Except for the few years between 1935 and 1938 in which O’Keeffe painted the *Ram's Head, White Hollyhock-Hills* and the *Ram's Head, Blue Morning Glory*, respectively, it appears that she repeatedly depicted the same animal skulls in multiple paintings, throughout a short span of time. For example, starting in 1930, O’Keeffe begins the series of skull paintings with the depiction of a horse skull; in 1931 it appears she was most focused on cow skulls, and in 1936 deer. While it is difficult to pin point if there is true correlation to such findings other than mere coincidence, there is no coincidence that O’Keeffe’s natural surroundings inspired the subject matter of such works.

Following O’Keeffe’s very first visit to New Mexico in 1929, in 1930 –the same year she began featuring animal skulls in her paintings- the artist witnessed the severe drought that the southern state suffered. This event negatively affected the surrounding southwest area, as it constrained limited water sources, and as a result destroyed any fruitful farm land, which killed crops and lead to the starvation of many animals. As the skeletons of the animals littered the desert landscape O’Keeffe became increasingly interested with their aesthetics and began collecting them herself, as she kept all of “the bones and rocks she collected from the desert floor.”\(^1\) It wasn’t long before she started placing them in her studio, sprinkling them among her living quarters, and fashioning them into decorative compositions. As her collection grew, so did her amusement with the bones she found in New Mexico and “subjects specific to that area.”\(^2\) Although at this point in time, O’Keeffe was still primarily residing in New York, it wasn’t long after her initial trip to New Mexico that she realized she needed to make a move to the desert and find place where she could set up her own studio and living quarters. In the meanwhile,
she began painting the bones that she had brought back with her. This much is known from information beyond the completed paintings that of course show that she featured the subject matter in her works. One example being in her writing, where she proved her deliberate intent and planning. In a letter written and dated May 16, 1931 by O’Keeffe, she wrote that from the bones she found and collected, “I’m going to make something very beautiful of them…they are very grand.”

As O’Keeffe was intrigued by the visually appealing and interesting quirks of the skulls, she decided to integrate them into her works immediately. Only, she traded the floral subject matter that she was best known for, for the more grim subject matter of skulls. Yet, she didn’t compromise entirely, in many of the paintings, including *Summer Days*, her signature floral elements continued to appear; accenting and decorating the skulls that they were paired with. This created a striking contrast between the softness of the flower petals and the hardness of the skull; the warmth that came with the color of the flower and the coolness of the dried bone; the two elements worked to make up for the qualities that the other lacked. In the oddest way, the subjects complimented one another, despite the jarring juxtaposition. Looking into the meaning of the elements, they both shared natural components, and each related to life, as well as to death. Through such selection, O’Keeffe was able to add an increasingly interesting meaning to her still life, landscape painting scenes. Thus creating a hybrid of genres, occurring as O’Keeffe was more interested in capturing her experiences and surroundings. O’Keeffe was less concerned about the formal qualities associated with what was coined to make an art work successful or popular and cared more about depicting what spoke to her in her paintings. She claimed that “sometimes I’ll get an idea from something that’s been
around me all the time, and I’ll just suddenly notice it,” inspiring her to feature what she had most recently “noticed” in her works.4

Looking at *Summer Days*, it at first glance, is difficult to place in one specific genre. The painting itself captures the dream-like air of an abstracted landscape scene accented with still life elements. While all of the elements presented have ties to nature, it is arguable that there is not a coherent correlation between them, or at least one that is easily recognizable to the general viewer. Yet, in a way, this encourages the viewer to further engage with the images. He or she must utilize the symbolic meaning associated with the presence of the objects that complete the painting. Considering such, understanding the composition and relationship of the elements in position to one another is very important.

To begin, O’Keeffe uses bold, bright colors to illustrate the warmth of the landscape. Red, barren hills are set beneath a bright blue sky that is masked by heavily present white, smoky clouds. Embedded in the clouds rise a cluster of flowers. In the center, floats a red plant and stemming from it are light, dainty, and wispy violet flowers. Floating further right of the arrangement is a large yellow sunflower. This is the largest flower and most obscurely placed. It breaks the symmetry of the otherwise very balanced composition. In contrast, a dry, bare deer skull and its antlers are suspended in mid air, among the clouds in the direct center of painting. Bilateral symmetry is emphasized within the details of the skull as a vertical line, which emphasizes the dryness and definition of the skull, strikes through the center of skull. This detail also provides a linear division for the composition; splitting the painting right down the middle, marking
a distinguishable center that allows the painting to be viewed in terms of left or right of a central axis.

The next step in identifying the meaning of the narrative divulges into the symbolic meanings connected to each of the depicted elements. This goes further than visual analysis, yet is important to recognize. However, general associates of a skull may infer the relation to death, as does the barren landscape. Clouds are often associated with dreams, and in still life painting flowers often act as a memento mori. They represent the passage of time and allude to the spoiling of life. This very much connects to the event of the drought experienced in New Mexico, which occurred just a few years prior to the completion of this painting. This connection allows the viewer to think about the painting through a much more critical lens. Leading he or she to wonder if perhaps O’Keeffe found this particular skull during that period, or if this deer was one of the many animals that were a victim of the chain effects of the drought? Such critical thinking allows the viewer to have a deeper engagement with the image. While these connections are based off solely off of visual associations, it is difficult to say if O’Keeffe would have expected such a high level of detailed thoughts or questions, nonetheless, they further one’s understanding about the composition and help to distinguish the correlation among elements.

However, luckily for researchers and academics, O’Keeffe documented her thoughts and experiences by keeping notes and writing letters that chronicled her days. She often wrote to loved ones and saved the corresponding letters. In one instance, she actually wrote of finding a deer skull, like the very one depicted in *Summer Days* and *Deers Skull With Pedernal*. In a letter dated June of 1936 – the same year she painted
Summer Days – she claims to have “found a perfect little deer’s head…I’ll have to do something about that-it is unusually fine- of course I’ll probably be asking to take it along.” Of course, by engaging with O’Keeffe’s Summer Days painting, it appears as though she indeed did ‘take it along,’ and ‘do something about’ it.

Continuing to think about Summer Days, in the grand realm of things, especially alongside of the literature that O’Keeffe wrote and kept, it is important to take a look at the other works of art that she completed contemporaneously to this specific painting. A very interesting comparison and perhaps counterpart to Summer Days, is her painting, Deers Skull With Pedernal, which also happened to have been completed in 1936. The two share striking aesthetic similarities and exemplify the vastness of the dessert sky. The clouds offer each of the paintings a transcendent quality, as the skulls, which are placed in the middle of the composition, appear as if they are looming amid the clouds. The skulls’ antlers take up the upper third of the painting and touch the air of the sky that surrounds them. Despite the skulls offerings a grim presence to the piece, they also offer stability as their placement provides symmetry. The skulls alone add great volume to the composition too, especially with their widespread, sprawling antlers. Although the skulls share very similar formal qualities, the antlers of the skull depicted in the Deers Skull With Pedernal painting’s appear to be curled a bit tighter than the antlers of the Summer Days skull. If it were not for this small difference one might wonder if these two paintings are based off of the same deer skull. While there is chance that that could be the case, especially concerning the previously mentioned letter, it is certain that O’Keeffe wished there to be a bit of variation between the two, considering the difference in representation of the antlers. It is also likely that there is a difference in the skulls as
O’Keeffe wrote about composing a composition that featured a skull fashioned onto a tree that sounds very similar to what is seen in the Deers Skull With Pedernal painting. O’Keeffe wrote that after having found “a very delicate little deer’s head. [That was] only of a size that could fit on a viga… I noticed it, and said, ‘Well I’ll paint it.’ [So] I took it out and hung it on a tree.” This information reveals O’Keeffe’s creative thought process towards composing props in a fashionable or mindful way and shows that she was interested in how she would go about represent the object in relation to one another in her paintings.

Representational qualities and the visual likeness to a genuine form is also another very interesting and relevant subject to consider, especially considering the dream-like qualities of both of these works. While the skull of the Deers Skull With Pedernal painting appears to be attached to a dead tree trunk, which provides a stabilizing element to the composition as well as a logical explanation for the skull’s suspension, the Summer Days skull is much more whimsical. As if suspended in mid air by magic, no stabilizing elements to support the skull to provide an explanation for it’s positioning are present. As there are no visually logical explanations for the skull’s placement provided within the painting, it is at this point the viewer must take the abstraction of forms into account.

While the public was familiar with O’Keeffe’s abstracted, interpretive depictions of flowers, when she chose to switch things up and feature a new subject matter, the public was shocked. Startled, is actually more likely to be a better description of their feelings, as they had not expected O’Keeffe to produce work that revolved around such strange and grim subject matter. In the eyes of the public, it was alarming to watch an artist’s focus swing from flower petals to animal bones. However, perhaps this was ever
more motive for O’Keeffe. Despite having found love and marriage with the man who professionally promoted and initially financially supported her art, the independently famous and popular American photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, O’Keeffe disagreed with the way he branded her art.

This trails back, a decade earlier, when O’Keeffe’s career first started really taking off and her focus was primarily on floral works, she believed her artistic intent was misunderstood. This in large part has much to do with the timeliness of the emergence of Freudian art theory and commentary provided by critics, as well as statements provided by Stieglitz. Especially as he was known as the “one to suggest [that] such sexual and feminine experiences were associated with O’Keeffe’s works, despite O’Keeffe directly denying and fighting critics who assumed so much.”7 However, this is not to say that Stieglitz was not successful in promoting O’Keeffe and her art, as he was greatly responsible for her fame and financial success.

It is documented that beginning in 1923 until his death in 1946, “he exhibited her art annually and promoted O’Keeffe and her work by talking about it constantly, to anyone who would listen, and encouraging critics to write about it.”8 Yet, O’Keeffe was not in tune with the notion that all press was good press, especially as she disagreed with much of what was printed about her. For example both critics and the general public alike viewed her flower paintings to have been driven by her feminine sexuality. They believed that the way she depicted flowers, such as the 1926 painting, *Black Iris*, (fig. 7) was in likeness to the female genitalia. They felt that the reason she depicted flowers this way stemmed from her overpowering female sexuality and that it was responsible for clouding and abstracting her vision of true flowers. This was all despite her denial to such claims
and many attempts to provide alternative explanations. Regardless, her work was very much branded this way.

While O’Keeffe felt discouraged, she was not stopped by what was printed in the press. Actually, quite the contrary, in spite of it all, O’Keeffe was motivated to take control of her career the best she knew how- by channeling her frustrations into her work and producing art. However, O’Keeffe did this in a couple of ways. The first was to make the move to New Mexico all by herself, to independently establish her own studio away from the distractions of everyday life; and the second was much later in life, nearly at the end of it, when she decided to publish her own book, as she felt writing her own book would best enabled her to set the record straight and allow herself to finally control the words printed about her, once and for all. It was important to her to have the last word, as she previously felt so muted.

Following O’Keeffe’s decision to finally move southwest, details little by little collected, providing a better explanation for her change in interests. Perhaps this stems from O’Keeffe’s initial, physical separation from Stieglitz. Although they remained married and shared letters detailing their love for one another the separation created a division between the two. This separation was particularly new for the couple, especially as they were so frequently together. Even from the start, beginning in 1916, when they first met. The two were immediately transfixed by the other’s presence, despite their incredible differences. O’Keeffe who at the time was 29 years old was merely “an unknown artist living and teaching in Texas.” And even then, she only ever really “taught sporadically,” and “her work had never been exhibited and was unknown to all but a few friends and family.” Stieglitz was 52 and an established, famously
“preeminent figure in the American art world.”

He was an “internationally known photographer, [and] was also America’s leading advocate of modern art and a master publicist,” all of which sounded quite intriguing for a hopeful artist like O’Keeffe. And still, Stieglitz was equally as intrigued by the work that O’Keeffe was producing at the time.

Even though they were in very different stages of their lives and careers, they couldn’t deny the connection. Shortly after their first meeting, they began corresponding through letters with one and other and Stieglitz began promoting O’Keeffe by exhibiting her works in his gallery. However, it did not take long for the professional relationship to turn passionate. In a letter dated December 1917, O’Keeffe wrote to Stieglitz: “I wonder what you are to me- it’s like father, mother, brother, sister, best man and woman friend, all mixed up in one-I love you greatly.” In June of 1918, O’Keeffe moved to NYC where Stieglitz was living in order to be closer to both Stieglitz and the art scene that New York provided.

In December of 1924, O’Keeffe and Stieglitz were married. This occurred just three months following the finalization of Stieglitz’s divorce from his first wife, although the two had been separated since 1918. Considering the great age differences between the two, the public found their relationship to be quite scandalous, “yet because their art, their lives, and their work were so deeply intertwined,” marriage seemed like a very natural progression for the couple. Nonetheless, it was made known that their marriage was attached to their personal feelings for one another, rather than their professions. To prove so, O’Keeffe continued to sign her works with her own name “to advertise her independence.” This was a bold and deliberate decision on her behalf. It is also quite
telling of her work ethic and how focused she was on her art. O’Keeffe was heavily concerned with expanding her personal career and maintaining her individuality. She wanted to come off as “an assertive, courageous, hard working and self-realized artist.”

Although it is likely that O’Keeffe would have denied that this decision was motivated by any feminist intent whatsoever, it most certainly may be read as a progressive choice, especially considering the time period.

Fast forward a couple years and although O’Keeffe recognized that “she was deeply in love with Stieglitz and knew that his ardent promotion of her work had been key to her success,” yet she also realized that her life with him was “beginning to compromise her independence and, more important, her work.” It was at this point she decided to pack her bags up and move. When O’Keeffe first arrived in New Mexico, at the Ghost Ranch, where she purchased a property that sufficed as a home and studio, she nearly missed it, as ”the only thing marking its location-an animal skull- was small and easy to miss,” this was in the August of 1934. The privacy that the land offered O’Keeffe was her dream come true, and the marking of property by a single animal’s skull foreshadowed much of what was to come for O’Keeffe.

Right off the bat, O’Keeffe began turning the property into a space that ignited inspiration and artistic creativity. But it did not take much for her, as the environment offered her so much. Rather than to manipulate the area into a form that suited her, she more so worked with the land and the southwestern culture that engulfed her. She took to her surroundings well and wished to embody and embrace it the best she could. For her, this meant decorating her home with the natural objects she came across, as this was the tradition for adorning adobe houses. She would fashion “dried animal bones, skulls, and
antlers” into décor.\textsuperscript{20} She felt that they gave her life and inspiration and because of it, she wished to almost pay a kind of homage to them. She loved the property so much; she said that she felt as if her home and the land surrounding it “had been made [especially] for a painter.”\textsuperscript{21} Inspiration lurked in every crinkle and crevice of the hills, among the dry, cracked earth, and within the carcasses of animals whose bodies took root in the land and clouds danced by day and the stars that decorated the sky by night. She wrote “I just feel so like expanding here-way out to the horizon-and up into the sunshine-and out into the night,” it was evident that O’Keeffe needed nothing more than what the rise and fall of the sun and fall moon could reveal to her.\textsuperscript{22}

O’Keeffe was so moved by the rawness of New Mexico’s nature and landscape, that she could no longer focus on painting singularly on flowers. She shared that the “bad lands roll away from my door, hill after hill-red hills of apparently the same sort of earth that you mix with oil to make paint. All the earth colors of the painter’s palette are out there in the many miles of bad lands.”\textsuperscript{23} This inspired her to paint the landscape scene that surrounded her, driving her to leave the flower paintings in her past, so she could move forward to focus on capturing the nature that she now lived among. Yet, the public was not convinced and cried for more flower paintings. O’Keeffe explained that just because “‘you [the viewer] have no association with those hills” because “you may not have seen it…you want me always to paint flowers.”\textsuperscript{24} However, O’Keeffe felt that because she had firsthand witnessed the beauty of the hills, part of “our most beautiful country,” that it was her job to best capture them for the rest nation to witness secondhand.\textsuperscript{25} But these paintings did not appeal to public as they were out of line with the kind of works that O’Keeffe’s persona was supposed to produce. At least, this was
out of line with the persona that had been constructed by the critics and Stieglitz, not O’Keeffe’s true character.

Paintings, like *Summer Days*, had little to offer the preconceived aura that was attached to O’Keeffe’s career, as it was more difficult—if at all possible—to attribute such a whimsical landscape, still life like painting to her sexuality or gender. Perhaps O’Keeffe’s *Summer Days* possessed a narrative that was not as appealing or sensual to the public. As her new images of southwestern subjects told a different story, one related to “personal reminiscence, occurring on an earthly plane;” and created emotions made the viewer feel “otherworldly, [by] moving the viewer into a transcendental or idealized realm,”—a realm that was created by O’Keeffe, rather than one that was sculpted by Stieglitz or critics.²⁶ This would have been seen as inconvenient for critics or even perhaps art historians of the time, as O’Keeffe already had an established brand, so to say, that was associated with her name and overshadowed her career. While her style still held true, her paintings that involved southwestern landscape were more in line with art that was being produced by male artists like Arthur Dove, rather than other female artists of the time. But this was not exactly new or surprising as O’Keefe discovered Dove’s work at the very beginning of her career and followed it throughout. Their connection especially grew after the two were introduced to one another. Dove likewise took interest an in O’Keeffe’s works and “they supported one another and collected and treasured one another’s work: Their paintings evince many visual parallels, the result less of specific influence than of their similar responses to natural forms.”²⁷ However this connection was rarely discussed and academics, critics, and institutions did not use the same
language to describe O’Keeffe’s works as they did Dove’s. This in large part was related to O’Keeffe’s gender, instead of the quality of her works.

While nearly a century has passed since the start of O’Keeffe’s career, unfortunately her works continue to be primarily viewed, taught, and explained in association to this gendered and sexualized narrative. However, this is slowly beginning to change as a result of the second wave of feminism that began in the United States in 1960s-70s. With it, emerged the Feminist art theory. While this newly found perspective was certainly not instantly implemented or researched, the way that female artists’ works are being evaluated and read is slowly starting to change. As time passes, so does the progress. For example, in March of 2016, the Tate Modern Museum announced that they would honor O’Keeffe’s voice and challenge “‘gendered and outdated’ readings that have previously been marketed to the general public,” in an exhibition devoted to O’Keeffe that would begin in July of that year.28 This is important because when O’Keeffe’s works were originally completed, her voice was not honored nor heard.

This frustrated her so much so that she found it necessary to offer an explanation for her feelings and made several attempts to correct the misconceptions spread about her and art work. These feelings motivated her to publish her own book, Georgia O’Keeffe, in 1976. She took this action as she thought that it would best enable her the access and opportunity to write directly from her own perspective. Wanda Corn’s 2009 article, “Telling Tales: Georgia O’Keeffe on Georgia O’Keeffe,” chronicles O’Keeffe’s feelings of frustration and discontentment with the cloud of information and public opinion that she felt falsely captured her works.
So unfortunately, because O’Keeffe was already well into her professional career before art was being critically analyzed through a feminist lens, she did not directly reap the benefits stemming from the art feminist theory. However, it seems that this is why she would have needed even more momentum and outlandish reason to defy the public persona associated with her name and career. Perhaps this is one of the additional reasons why O’Keeffe needed to stray from the subject matter that she felt so slandered her. Thus she turned to a thought much less feminine subject matter: skulls.

All in all, *Summer Days* reinstates O’Keeffe belief in art for art’s sake. It embodies the power of an artist’s selected subject matter, the mystique of the desert, and the strength and symbolism associated with objects native to the southwest region. *Summer Days* also challenges the viewer’s understanding and perception of O’Keeffe. This painting drives viewers to connect with the artist on a less traditional plain and encourages them to question the boundaries of representation and what it means to toy with perception. Overall *Summer Days* is a great leeway into the discussion of O’Keeffe’s evolution as an artist and how she used her art and matter featured in it to take back her career and give voice to her feelings and experiences.
Figure 2. Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue, 1931. Georgia O’Keeffe (American 1887–1986). The Met Museum.
Figure 5. From the Faraway, Nearby, 1937. Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887–1986). The Met Museum.
Figure 6. Ram's Head, Blue Morning Glory, 1938. Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887–1986). Georgia O’Keeffe Museum.
Bibliography


Endnotes

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4 Ibid., 78.
5 Ibid., 78.
6 Ibid., 78.
8 Buhler Lynes, 13.
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