

Georgia O'Keeffe's Flower paintings

"Nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small. We haven't time - and to see takes time like to have a friend takes time.

If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small. So I said to myself - I'll paint what I see - what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it - I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

...Well, I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower - and I don't."

- Georgia O'Keeffe

"The circumstances of her life are not the example. It is the abstracting- as with the flowers, bones, the simplicity-that should be the example, the abstract continuity of unseen patterns and clues, culled in perhaps unrecognizable form at first, but revealing, when examined, a simple clarity, wholeness." (Taylor Patten)

Georgia O'Keeffe a woman whom no one really knows the whole truth about is one of the most renowned artists of the twentieth century. No one really knows when and where she was born, she has never told anyone too much about her private life. Even people closest to her did not know what sort of a person she really was and what she really felt inside. People know small pieces of her life, they know certain facts, but not all of them, most information about her past comes from thorough research and not directly from O'Keeffe. People have tried to patch her life up with facts. She led a very private life and tried to be secluded from the world not wanting people to know much about what had happened to her, if anything. Lots of what people think happened to her as a young girl were presuppositions and may or may not be true.

Georgia O'Keeffe once said in an interview

"The meaning of a word - to me - is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words. I write this because such odd things have been done about me with words. I have often been told what to paint. I am often amazed at the spoken and written word telling me what I have painted. I make this effort because no one else can know how my paintings happen. Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with and where I have been that should be of interest."

Georgia O'Keeffe is one of the most influential artists there is today. Her works are valued highly and are quite beautiful and unique. As a prominent American artist, Georgia O'Keeffe is famous for her images of gigantic flowers, city-scapes and distinctive desert scenes. All of these different phases represent times in her life. However I will be concentrating on her flower paintings, which were done during her first phase of painting which began in 1912, when she met a man by the name Alfred Stieglitz, who was famous German photographer. Art historians have largely accepted the view that O'Keeffe's art was shaped by Alfred Stieglitz and the work of the European modernists she encountered under his tutelage--a view actively

encouraged by the famous photographer himself.

Throughout the seventy years of her creative career, Georgia O'Keeffe continually made some of the most original contributions to the art of our time. As Georgia O'Keeffe's awareness of her sexuality heightened, she started to paint marvelous original abstractions in exuberant rainbows or colors. These colors seemed to celebrate her happiness. One of her paintings Music--Pink and Blue I (see Appendix 1) , she encircles a "blue vaginal void with pulsating waves of rippling pink and white" . The first reaction that most people would get by looking at it, would be that it represented a woman's genitalia. There is always so much that you can get from a picture, but many people get different things out of each painting. Everyone that looks at a painting will definitely have a different interpretation of what they see. The white sizing under the smooth surface makes the colors luminate in Music--Pink and Blue I. The two oval shapes bring out the sea, sky, and other images. The central form is a little more complex. The left archway uses blues and pinks alternately. On the inner edge of the arch, pink hues mix in to rise with gray edges. The warm colors and lines are controlled yet fluid. As the title tells, an inner and outer harmony is reached. Colours that the artist uses is very important, each colour represents a mood, idea etc. we could say that the pinks that Georgia uses and the other primary colours, could be sort of childhood memories. But of course these are just assumptions and unless we hear it from the artist herself we will never know for sure.

Another one of Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers, the Black Iris, is noted for its sensual suggestiveness, but she insisted that she was representing the flower itself and never admitted that she had drawn it to look anything but. She even flatly denied that the flower was a metaphor for female genitalia. O'Keeffe's flowers were painted frontally and revealingly had the effect of making the human beings who stood in front of them become smaller.

"The observer feels like Alice after she had imbibed the 'Drink Me' phial" wrote a reviewer in amusement. The size of the bloom relative to a human really reflected the relative importance of nature and mankind in the artist's eyes, was how Georgia explained her flowers. Georgia O'Keeffe painted everything from lilies, jonquils, daisies, irises, sweet peas, morning glories, poppies, forget-me-nots, marigolds, poinsettias, orchids, sunflowers, petunias, marigolds, and many more were reborn in her paintings. O'Keeffe wasn't happy because people looked at her paintings and tried to see them in the way of a female. She said,

"Well--I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower--and I don't."

She did not like the idea that people thought she painted the way she did because she was a female. She hated being called a feminist and resented the fact that her critics had said so much about her art that she disliked. She painted that way because that was how she saw things. The flowers that she created epitomize her growth, success, magnetism, and energy at that certain stage in her career. This was her stage in her life when she met with Stieglitz. He was 23 years her senior, and was thought to have been a sort of father figure to her. Stieglitz wrote an article emphasizing what he saw as the interest of her work from the point of view of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud and his ideas about sex and psychology were also new. Other critics found O'Keeffe's pictures to be symbols of female sexuality, even pornographic, despite the lack of realism.

Georgia O'Keeffe was thought to have been "sexually abused" by her father as a

young child. " She had most likely been molested by her father." Freud believed that girls who had been molested as children, grew up looking for older men who could be a father figure, this was the Oedipus Complex. He was also the reason why O'Keeffe had her first exhibition, when he first saw O'Keeffe's work he knew that she would later on become famous. However, She seemed to have a problem with sharing her artwork with the general public, or anyone at all. Perhaps it was because she put so much of herself into her drawings and paintings; her sexuality, her confidence, fears, experiences, and hopes.

At first, the relationship between him and O'Keeffe was innocent; a patron and artist, a student and teacher, or perhaps even a father and daughter. Stieglitz's obviously paternalistic role could have been a substitute for the role Georgia's father played early in her life.

O'Keeffe began to model for Stieglitz's camera, and an enormous portfolio of breathtaking nude photography emerged after many years of accumulation. Of course, Alfred's wife Emmy did not find it particularly breathtaking to come across the pair in

the middle of a sitting. Georgia had not been the first woman the older man had had an affair with, and this time his marriage was over for good. Stieglitz and O'Keeffe cohabited cramped New York City studio apartments, most often occupying separate beds. They had a strange relationship which consisted of similar intellects, much stubborn and violent argument, and an artistic partnership where each fed off the other's creativity. Many biographers suggest that they were simply together because it was convenient and mutually beneficial, and they had few emotional ties. After all, why would a woman who had such lesbian tendencies suddenly attach herself to a man of such strong personality who seemed to dominate her? Stieglitz was a demanding hypochondriac who always needed care, right up to his dying day. Theirs was an unusual union, and after he passed on, Georgia continued her life in earnest. This is far from the entire volume of Georgia O'Keeffe's lifetime. It was a long, frequently lonely life, even when she was surrounded by people. She chose to isolate herself from a growing, modernizing country where every mark she put on paper supposedly represented the whole of the female gender.

When O'Keeffe was with Stieglitz, she had never up to that point of her life really showed her femininity, she had always been sort of manly looking, she always had her hair cut short and never wore anything showing her body off. However, during the time Stieglitz and O'Keeffe knew each other, Stieglitz had become obsessed with photographing Georgia since the beginning of their relationship. He would take over 300 portraits of her between 1918 and 1937. They were mostly erotic pictures, showing O'Keeffe's femininity. This was the period where her flowers were produced.

"I know now that most people are so closely concerned with themselves that they are not aware of their own individuality, I can see myself, and it has helped me to say what I want to say...in paint."

Her choice to paint these flowers was influenced by

"her early training, natural attraction to flowers, and the idea of something fresh and fragile"

was how O'Keeffe described her first attraction to draw these flowers . she always said that she believed people did not have time to look and appreciate things so she drew them large so that people would stop and see them. I believe that Alfred Stieglitz had an effect on her, which helped her express what she had been longing too all her childhood.

Close observations of O'Keeffe's flowers show that she never really pursued the

realistic approach. She didn't paint every petal and detail. Instead she gave her flowers a life of their own, and expression that changed significantly between 1918 and 1938. Her red canna painting gradually enlarged the central flower image and brought it closer to the edges of the canvas. Between 1926 and 1929 she painted a group of views of New York City. In 1929 she went to new Mexico and that was when she got her inspiration to draw her desert scopes. These pictures lacked a middle distance: Objects appeared either very near or very far in the desert air. This is a total contrast from her views of enlarged flowers. Which I believe is because, she grew up, she accepted what had happened to her, she was able to find peace at last in new Mexico.

Georgia O'Keeffe approached her subjects, whether buildings or flowers, landscapes or bones, by intuitively magnifying their shapes and simplifying their details to underscore their essential beauty. Her painting of Black Cross, is a large, dark cross which seems to stand watch over the rolling hills at sunset, proclaiming man's presence in this stark landscape. In Grey Hill Forms, Georgia O'Keeffe begins with the traditionally painterly ideals. Strong diagonal lines of recession draw the eye through the scene to create a smoothly three dimensional space. The yellow and green colors blend into deeper indigos and grays. The dramatic contrasts in light and tone aid in the formation of space without causing too much motion in the scene. The strong lines throughout give the images more conceptual meaning. The mountains are tangible and solid, clearly separated from both the ground and the deep blue sky. The light dramatizes both the depth and clarity in the painting. Georgia O'Keeffe is more concerned with the essential identity of things rather than the mere visual appearance. Suspicious of intellectual approaches to art, she was an introspective and independent visionary who thrived on isolation. O'Keeffe's original American works encompass a wide vision from taut city towers to desertscares in such vivid hues and startled the senses.

Georgia O'Keeffe's femininity is not the essence of her art and self, but as the "chief quality attributed to both." However you cannot deny that her painting's are of womanhood that her painting's are "that of a woman". However painting something which is "about being a woman" and a painting by "a woman" is not the same, they are two totally different things. You cannot say that a painting being made by a woman is feminist, it could be what she sees and not feels. Georgia all her life was accused and criticized for her flower paintings. Her painting were always described as representing the sexuality of woman, however she never admitted or described her paintings as being anything close to that. She perceived her art as how she saw the objects. Her flowers were flowers and nothing more, she saw the flowers and she painted them. "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar", Freud is reported to have said. One critic wrote later that she was "spiritualizing her sex" and that when women felt strongly it was "through the womb." O'Keeffe was impatient with that kind of criticism. "What if it is children and love in paint?" she asked. "What does it matter if the its origin is emotional or aesthetic?" Even though O'Keeffe has never admitted that her paintings represent women's genitalia I do see them as representing that exactly. There are theories behind the paintings and Georgia's O'Keeffe's interest with flower, and why the looked so much like vagina's. the first theory which that she was abused by her father is one, and even though she never admitted it, I think it is possible. All her life she never had any successful relationships with men, they never lasted long, even her marriage with Stieglitz, this is one example that her and men did not go. Most of the men she had relationships with were always senior to her by many years, it seemed that she was always looking for a father type figure, which is one of a sign of molestation. She probably was trying to face the fact of what had happened to her and so sought comfort in older men, maybe because their sexual needs were not as high as younger men. When Georgia was a young girl and

an adolescent, she always looked like a man, she tried making herself look unattractive as possible, maybe so that she would not attract men as much, however that changed when she met Stieglitz, he brought the woman out of her, and that was when she began drawing her flowers. However these are only theories and assumptions that people have made, since there is no actual proof to whether this is true, only small parts which were put together. People have also thought that she was bisexual in nature and that she had relationships with other woman, however this never came out in the open. .

"On the other hand, she adored her female counterparts, having friendships with some and sexual relationships with others."

However if this was true another theory to her paintings was that she was ashamed of being attracted to woman and her paintings were an outlet or her interests in other women. These things of course are not sure, but if the case was so it probably affected O'Keeffe emotionally and changed her prospective on life.

There was once a incident when she was younger. When enrolled in classes at the Art Students' League in New York City, she ran, terrified, out of a figure drawing class where stood a male nude model. In all her years, Georgia surrounded herself with ineffectual males who were frequently homosexual. Perhaps she liked them because they posed no threat to her.

Throughout her life, American artist Georgia O'Keeffe avoided addressing the many intellectual theories, aesthetic debates and interpretive speculations regarding the symbolic sexuality in her work. A private person, she was brilliantly inventive and learned as a young artist to trust her own instincts and intuition. O'Keeffe said her highly individualistic paintings were "an outpouring of things in my head that are not like what anyone had taught me". She never faltered from saying that her paintings did not have anything to do with her own sexuality or the sexuality of any other woman. She was truly a brilliant artist who was able have their whole concentration on her paintings. She was able to mesmerize her on lookers, and shocked most of them by her flower painting, in a way she had not been expecting. The theories of her sexual abuse, and her homosexual tendencies are not proven. Most of her critics were men, and could have misunderstood what Georgia O'Keeffe was actually trying to show us. The fiction of O'Keeffe's sexuality and femininity was upheld in two different quarters; each one giving a different version of her paintings. The viewer is allowed to sometimes claim a knowledge in response to their imagery

"differentiating that knowledge as female is a special departure on his or her part, one licensed and enforced by the gendering of O'Keeffe's own place in the world." However other people believe that her reason for painting the flowers were that of, trying to claim identity, power and knowledge. She tried to show people the unshowable, the body in it's essence, and without a gender; "the interior of the body ,when no corresponding exterior can be imagined."

I still stick to the fact that Georgia was trying to show more than just a flower in hr paintings, I also do believe that she was abused as a younger child and that she may have had sexual relationships with other women. However I do not have the actual proof, from what I have read and patched together, and also from what I see I think that I am not wrong in thinking so. However this is my own theory, and many people have other ones. Her Flower paintings introduced a new female imagery. O'Keeffe plays with the idea of women's sexuality through abstraction. Vibrant colours and forms are used to create a new language in women's art which is free of ideologies and traditional conventions. Even though many will not agree with what I have said about Georgia, I think that many agree that her art gave every person something to think about. She has left us standing with many roads to take about what her art really mean to her.

