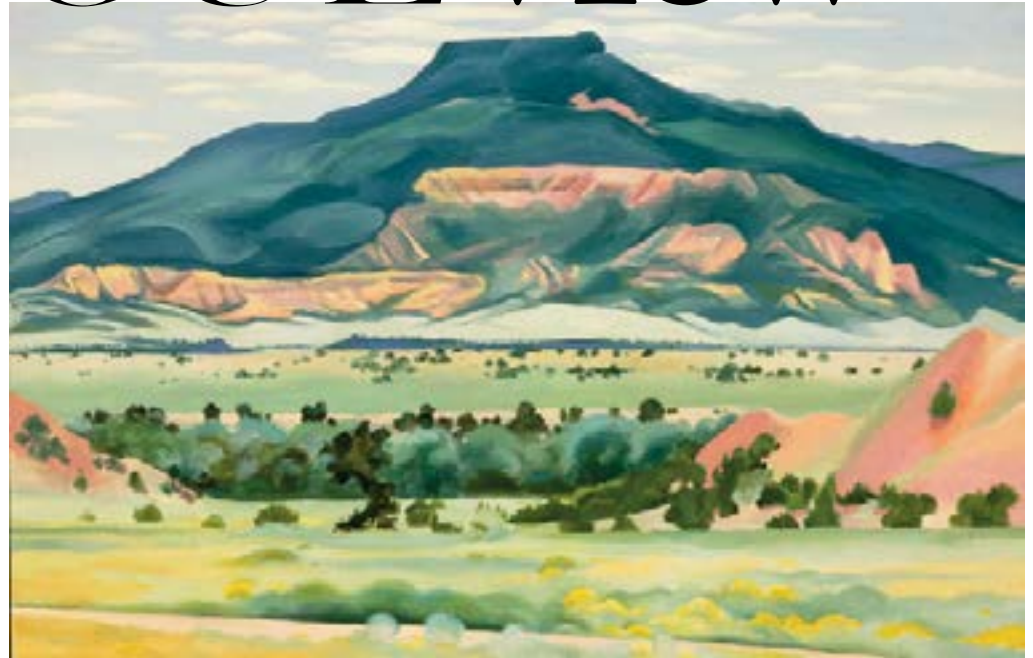


VOGUE view



In her ELEMENT

As a major new Georgia O'Keeffe retrospective opens, Bella Pollen journeys through the landscape that shaped the artist's life and work

The dust is blowing, the sun is burning and the air is sweet and dry. Spring in New Mexico, and soon the jimson weed will be in bloom. I'm standing in the high desert surrounded by rock formations, a millefeuille of ochre and red dotted with the scrub of juniper and pinyon. Time barely changes this Mesozoic landscape, and 50 years ago you might have seen her, a solitary figure, walking the purple hills, observing, sketching.

Had you not known, you might have wondered – who was she, this diligent recorder of nature. A botanist? An amateur watercolourist? Then she stoops to pick up a small, sun-bleached bone and holds it to her eye. Through it, she observes the flat top of the Pederal hill, has an epiphany – and goes on to paint another masterpiece of American modernism.

The more that is written, the greater the enigma Georgia O'Keeffe presents. She's the highest-selling female artist at auction in history and was the first woman to be given a retrospective at Moma, yet look for her paintings in a British gallery and you'll find none. Now, on the centenary of her debut in New York, Tate Modern is finally giving O'Keeffe the attention she's due in an extensive and highly illuminating show spanning six decades of her career.

For a woman always so defiantly her own person, O'Keeffe has been heavily labelled – feminist role

model, recluse, chronicler of female genitalia. Those pesky flowers account for a tiny percentage of her artistic output, but the debate they provoke, along with her iconic status, has long overshadowed her other work. After a century of persistent cliché it may be hard to redress the balance, but according to Tanya Barson, curator of Tate Modern's upcoming show, it's time to try.

The seeds of the O'Keeffe story are well documented. Born in 1887, she was one of seven children raised on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. Having decided to become an artist at the age of 10, she attended institutes in Chicago and New York, then the University of Virginia, where she was introduced to the philosophy and methods of Arthur Wesley Dow. It was her subsequent charcoal abstractions that found their way to the photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz, who first championed her in 1916.

O'Keeffe was never cut out to fit in. "A girl who would be different, in habit, style and dress," declares her school yearbook. Candid and unpredictable, she scorned the frills and curls of her time for a

long black plait and monochromatic clothing. If, even back then, she was unconsciously constructing an identity and looking for someone to record it, then who better than Stieglitz, the most influential figure of the New York art scene? For more than a decade the two were artistically, intellectually and romantically intertwined, exchanging thousands of letters, painting and photographing the same New York skylines, and together creating a multifaceted portrait of O'Keeffe across more than 300 intimate images. Here lies the nub of the O'Keeffe paradox: the willing eroticising of the self while vigorously rejecting any sexual interpretation of her art. O'Keeffe may have hated the Freudian associations and resented Stieglitz for exploiting them, but they made her one of the highest earning American artists of the day.

By 1929, O'Keeffe's fame had eclipsed her husband's and the dynamic between them changed. Stieglitz, egotist, chronicler of beautiful women, also had a weakness for them. His infatuation with the young photographer Dorothy Norman devastated O'Keeffe and she escaped New York for >

Above left: O'Keeffe in New Mexico, 1937. Above: My Front Yard, Summer, 1941. Below: Jimson Weed/White Flower No 1 (1932), which sold for \$44.4 million in 2014



the place that would come to inspire her: the American Southwest.

One of Stieglitz's circle, Mabel Dodge Luhan, had been pressing O'Keeffe to visit her in the town of Taos, New Mexico, where she had surrounded herself with an extraordinary group of artists and thinkers, from DH Lawrence to Carl Jung and Paul Strand. Upon arriving, O'Keeffe was immediately struck by the force of the land. "There is something clean about this world," she wrote to Stieglitz, "like walking across new snow." It would be her love affair with this landscape that would endure, and Stieglitz knew it. "Without you I am nothing," he wrote back. "Without me you go right ahead – will be Georgia O'Keeffe."

O'Keeffe spent the next few summers in Taos, returning to New York every winter with new paintings for Stieglitz to exhibit. This was the period of bleached bones, cow skulls, crosses and *Jimson Weed/White Flower No 1*, the picture that would make headlines in 2014 in New York with its record-breaking price of \$44.4 million. Despite Stieglitz's protestations of love, he remained openly involved with Norman. O'Keeffe endured and endured, but finally, in 1932, for professional as well as personal reasons, she succumbed to a prolonged breakdown for which she was hospitalised.

The Southwest is vast enough to absorb any amount of pain, and after a 13-month hiatus from painting, O'Keeffe returned. Ghost Ranch, a property an hour outside Taos, was her own piece of desert. The house she bought had no electricity and a surfeit of rattlesnakes, of which she was deathly afraid. Nevertheless, it was there, in the exquisite bleakness of the landscape, that a steelier O'Keeffe set about redefining herself, no longer through the lens of a man, but in her own image, as an artist and a woman.

Ghost Ranch reinvigorated O'Keeffe's desire to paint. She'd learnt to drive and rejigged her beloved Model A Ford so she could work out of it. She had the eye and precision of a photographer and a fascination with manipulating size and scale. "O'Keeffe hovers between realism and abstraction," says Tanya Barson. "You look at her landscapes and find them fantastical, surrealist even, but they can be tracked back to the exact spot where they were painted. You might have to wait for the right light and shadows, but then the sun hits the

mountain in a certain way and you see what she saw."

In 1945, O'Keeffe acquired a second house in New Mexico. The run-down hacienda in Abiquiu belonged to the Catholic archdiocese of Santa Fe. It was not for sale but O'Keeffe became obsessed by a door in its patio wall. "It was something I had to have," she said. For a decade the irresistible force of artist battled the immovable object of Church. O'Keeffe triumphed, buying the house for \$10. She was to paint that door more than 30 times.

Abiquiu was less isolated than Ghost Ranch. More crucially, the house had a beautiful walled garden and water rights. O'Keeffe planted the garden with the same intensity as she painted, composting, pickling and freezing. A tour reveals some fascinating domestic



O'Keeffe turned a simple hacienda in Abiquiu into her home and studio

trivia. How O'Keeffe adored apple sauce and Bach, how she built a nuclear shelter because she was determined to see the post-apocalyptic landscape.

She was out shopping when news reached her that Stieglitz had suffered a massive stroke. She flew straight to New York and was at his bedside when he died. It took three years to sort out his affairs, after which O'Keeffe made New Mexico her permanent home. Over the ensuing decades she happily lost herself in her art, travelling the globe, organising retrospectives, haggling with museums. She never stopped exploring. She was curious and excited by everything but especially the natural world. *White Place in Shadow*, *Black Place*, *From the Faraway*, *Nearby*, all titles of works inspired by landscapes. Quite simply the wilderness held her spellbound. "O'Keeffe loved campfires," her friend Ansel Adams wrote in his autobiography, "and would stand close to them in her voluminous black cape, her remarkable features and dark hair gleaming in the flickering light. She never seemed bored or tired."

Photogenic, with a handsome face that aged well, O'Keeffe was a magnet for the great photographers of the day: Cecil Beaton, Irving Penn, Todd Webb. These portraits added to the growing O'Keeffe mystique ensuring her a privacy she might not otherwise have enjoyed; another paradox, but one this time over which she had complete control. She had always been shrewdly aware of her own value and legacy, refusing to sell her best paintings, regularly destroying others she didn't consider up to scratch. Even the classic O'Keeffe image of a misanthropic loner in the desert was a careful and deliberate construct. Certainly she preferred her own company to that of anyone who bored her, and would ruthlessly sideline wives if she found their husbands more entertaining. But while she put herself into seclusion to paint, she was not unsociable. She had affairs with both men and women. She hung out with Frida Kahlo and cooked for friends – Joni Mitchell and Allen Ginsberg were among those who visited Abiquiu. "When you see her," Barson says, "you see her alone, but turn around and there would always be five people behind her."

As time went on O'Keeffe began to suffer from macular degeneration, but her spirit prevailed. Aged 78, she painted the astonishing 24ft by 8ft *Sky Above Clouds IV*. "She was famous for painting place," Barson says admiringly, "and suddenly she left place, and painted air." Dotted among the mid-century furniture of the Abiquiu house are ceramics made under the tutelage of potter Juan Hamilton, her constant companion for the final years of her life.

O'Keeffe kept visiting Ghost Ranch almost until her death at 98. She needed the isolation. People must have driven her crazy, coming to Abiquiu and demanding her attention. Predictably, she gave them short shrift. But then, she'd already given the world her art. Perhaps it was enough.

Early evening in the desert and a hard wind is blowing. Through the long glass window of O'Keeffe's studio, dusk is streaked across the sky. This is where she painted, this complex and extraordinary woman, looking out at the craggy red hills. And I wonder – what was it she saw? Then the sun hits the mountains, shadows move and stretch and slowly they begin to appear – dark, rectangular shapes forming against the rock wall, each one a new opening, another door. ■

"Georgia O'Keeffe" is at Tate Modern, SE1, from July 6 to October 30