

## O'Keeffe show goes beyond familiar

**BY KERI GUTEN COHEN**

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Ask most Americans what they know about legendary artist Georgia O'Keeffe and they'll say sexually suggestive flowers and bleached cow skulls.

But she's much more complex than that.

"People are less familiar with her work than they think," says Carole McNamara, assistant director for collections and exhibitions at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, where the traveling show, "Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape," makes its debut Sunday.

"O'Keeffe is such an American icon that people assume they know all about her," McNamara says. "Although most known for her flower paintings, the great preponderance of her work is landscapes."

The exhibition offers insight into the intensely personal vision of this American legend, whose career spanned seven decades and whose life lasted nearly a century. This was an independent woman who studied with renowned 19th-Century artists, married important photographer and gallery director Alfred Stieglitz, bucked his circle's penchant for European modernism and eventually made her home in New Mexico, where her heart connected with the rough, wild landscape she considered sublime.

Though she had painted in upstate New York, Texas and Canada, "O'Keeffe says she felt centered in New Mexico in a way she did nowhere else," McNamara says. "She developed such a sensitivity to the landscape and how the light hit it -- the colors, hue and shapes."

The exhibition gives a taste of her early works and her groundbreaking still-life paintings, where she fills her canvases with single flowers or leaves, but the majority is given over to her landscapes.

These vistas reveal O'Keeffe's way of seeing the land she explored around her -- a vision that bounces

### **"Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape"**

Opens Sunday

Through Sept. 26

University of Michigan Museum of Art,  
525 S. State, Ann Arbor

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Sun., 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thu., noon-5 p.m. Sun.

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between detailed realism and the kind of abstraction that reduces mountains, rivers, trees, clouds and sparse buildings to flat fields of color and form.

O'Keeffe straddles the two styles with equal doses of ecstasy for the natural world and for America's vast spaciousness.

In many instances, the exhibition juxtaposes O'Keeffe's representational work with her more abstract paintings. For example, "Blue River (Chuma River, Ghost Ranch)" is a vertical piece reminiscent of the Asian scroll paintings she loved. It features an eroded canyon dotted with green shrubs in the background and a sensuous flowing river in the foreground. Her honed sense of observation yields sharp, exacting detail. In the nearby "Blue River," O'Keeffe offers what appears to be an aerial view of a blue-green river and its branches -- flat and abstract, yet organic enough to relate to a nearby painting of a tree and its branches. This aerial viewpoint appears early in her work as well and speaks to her fascination with viewing the land from an airplane.

"The Patio" is pure abstraction -- a brown wall of color with a black opening representing a door and a soft sliver of gray-blue sky. "Winter Road" is reduced to simple forms -- white snow and a curving, sexy brown ribbon of New Mexican road near her home. "Untitled (Desert Abstraction, Bear Lake)" is a distillation of the elements of water, earth and sky into majestic bands of color and light. In these and other works, O'Keeffe masterfully mixes hard and soft edges to enhance the sensuality of her vision.

In addition to O'Keeffe's work, a suite of photographs of clouds by Stieglitz shows how both husband and wife experimented with reducing nature to pure form. A set of photographs by Todd Webb shows an elderly O'Keeffe in her beloved New Mexico on location in the mountains and provides glimpses of her home studio. A nearby gallery features photographs from the UMMA collection by O'Keeffe's friend Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham, contemporaries also lured by America's natural beauty.

"Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape" is a must-see exhibition providing a rare chance to learn more about an American icon who offers much more than most of us realize.

Also at UMMA: Don't miss "Nature Transformed: Wood Art from the Bohlen Collection," featuring work by the world's best contemporary wood artists. The show, through Oct. 3, includes 72 pieces given to the museum by collectors Robert Bohlen and Lillian Montalto Bohlen of Brighton.

"Killing Ground," an intriguing photography exhibition, contrasts contemporary images of Civil War sites with historical images from the Civil War. It runs July 17-Nov. 7.

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