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Article published Sunday, August 1, 2004

Sublime landscapes Ann Arbor exhibit shows a different side of Georgia O'Keeffe's take on the world

By **TAHREE LANE**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things. - Georgia O'Keeffe

Big, sensuous flowers are what many associate with Georgia O'Keeffe.

But her portfolio holds far more landscapes, colorful and fluid, which are featured at two regional shows, each with a unique spin.

At the University of Michigan Museum of Art through Sept. 26, 35 O'Keeffes are displayed.

"We really liked the idea of having a revisionist look at an artist that everybody thinks they know," said Carole McNamara, curator for the show and assistant director for collections and exhibitions at the museum in the heart of campus.

Another collection of about 40 O'Keeffe paintings will open Oct. 5 at the Columbus Museum of Art. It was organized by the curator of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, where it's currently exhibited.

A Memphis group assembled the show that's in Ann Arbor, the first of its four stops. "Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape" is set in the context of the aesthetic tradition from whence she sprang, and it highlights her wonderful ability to migrate from realism to abstractionism.



Georgia O'Keeffe's *Waterfall No. III 'Iao Valley*, a 1939 oil on canvas.

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"She's one of the few artists who can do both in the same painting and can do both equally well," said McNamara. "Her sense of wonderment about the beauty of nature was really central to her and shows up over and over in her writing."



A 1936 oil on linen painting by O'Keeffe, *Red Hills with the Pedernal*.

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O'Keeffe's intense feelings about the land and its flora, at Lake George in New York but especially in her beloved Southwest, harks to a concept first described by British statesman/philosopher Edmund

Burke. In 1757, Burke wrote an essay about how powerful emotions such as fear, awe, dread, and wonder are part of the way we experience beauty.

Just inside the gallery are eight 19th-century paintings, including a large, 1856 oil by Asher B.

Durand. It's an example of how landscapes were often painted with a river or road in the foreground that wends to an immense feature in the background - a gathering storm or a looming mountain.

In young America, artists discovered the vast and majestic landscapes of the west and incorporated Burke's concept of the sublime in their work, said McNamara.

O'Keeffe was born in 1887 and grew up on a large dairy farm in Wisconsin. Her mother was from a privileged family in which the women were educated. Young Georgia studied with top artists in Chicago and New York. She won a scholarship for still lifes, and an elegant handful are grouped here - a peach and a glass, an apple, an eggplant; overlapping oak leaves in pink and brown. From the renowned William Merritt Chase, she learned the versatility of white.

There are two flower paintings, and a looping, bronze sculpture, inspired by goat horns and lacquered white. O'Keeffe herself selected many of the simple frames - metal strips keyed to a color on the canvas or sloping silver-leaf wood.

She taught in Texas and Virginia, and in 1916, found a fan in Alfred Stieglitz, a popular photographer and gallery operator in New York. Every year, he exhibited her work until he died in 1946. Her first sale, a charcoal, brought \$400 in 1916.

O'Keeffe married the much-older Stieglitz in 1924. She became enchanted with the Southwest and bought two homes in New Mexico, moving there after he died. She died in 1986 at the age of 98.

In addition to the 35 O'Keeffes, there are 30 photographs (12 are postcard-sized studies of clouds) by Stieglitz. He was fascinated with her hands, and photographed them resting on a steering wheel and caressing the skull of a horse.

There are also nine 1960s photographs by Todd Webb of O'Keeffe against her rocks.

Rounding out the show in an adjacent gallery are dozens of analogous photographs by O'Keeffe's contemporaries: majestic scenes by Ansel Adams, tightly shot magnolia buds by Imogen Cunningham, shells and pots by Edward Weston.


A second collection of O'Keeffe landscapes will exhibit Oct. 5 through Jan. 16 at the Columbus Museum of Art.

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Painstakingly researched, it includes 40 paintings and has a different premise: 20 O'Keeffes are paired with new color photographs of the actual locales she painted.

"I knew her landscape paintings were very site specific," said Barbara Buhler Lynes, curator of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe and organizer of "Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico: A Sense of Place," currently there.

Sometimes hiking for hours, Buhler Lynes hunted New Mexico for the precise locations that inspired O'Keeffe. Aware of geology, O'Keeffe was true to the contours and spirit of the subject, said the curator. Her approach was neither surreal nor intellectual.

"She's painting what she's seeing," said Buhler Lynes. "She had a matter-of-fact way of looking at the world," she said.

While at the U-M museum, check out a thought-provoking collection of then-and-now photographs. In "Killing Ground: Photographs of the Civil War and the Changing American Landscape," images of battle, prisoners, and slaves are paired with photographs of the same locations a century and a half later.

Photographer John Huddleston learned when and where the 19th-century pictures were taken, then took photos at the same place, the same time of year, and often at the same hour as the 19th-century images.

It's jarring to see a bloody battlefield juxtaposed with its present-day counterpart, which may be a fast-food restaurant or a parking lot. Through Nov. 7.

The University of Michigan Museum of Art is at 525 S. State Street in Ann Arbor. It's open Tues., Wed., Fri., and Sat. from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thurs., from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sunday noon to 5 p.m. Closed Monday. Admission is free. For information, call 734-763-UMMA or check www.umma.umich.edu.

The Columbus Museum of Art is at 480 E. Broad St. For information, call 614-221-4848 or check www.columbusmuseum.org.



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