



O'Keeffe landscape show needs more landscapes

Tuesday, July 20, 2004 By Roger Green

Booth Arts Writer

ANN ARBOR -- Early in her career, Georgia O'Keeffe described her penchant for imagery expressing "the wideness and wonder of the world as I live in it." That's the impetus behind her landscape paintings of New Mexico and other locales, and the premise of an informative if surprisingly somewhat landscape-deficient show.

"Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape" is a summertime attraction at the University of Michigan Museum of Art through Sept. 26. Organized and circulated by International Arts in Memphis, Tenn., the exhibit comprises 70-odd items, among them paintings and drawings by O'Keeffe (1887-1986), landscapes by earlier American painters and numerous photographs.

The point of the exhibit is to position O'Keeffe's landscapes in the romantic tradition of yearning for the sublime -- that is, for spiritual transcendence as evoked by mountains and other monumentally scaled landscape elements. A credible goal, allying O'Keeffe's landscapes with the sublime adds an exhilarating dimension to her art. The pity is that too few landscapes are included in the exhibit to support its central claim satisfyingly.

Among the 19th-century paintings on view are landscapes by Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, Asher B. Durand and others who stress nature's nobility and scale. Heroic landscapes by these painters are often described as heralding Abstract Expressionism's preoccupation with transcendence and personal freedom.

O'Keeffe's relationship to the earlier artists is loosely comparable, although it generated markedly different art. O'Keeffe was dissatisfied with imitative realism as a means of expression, and with the slick academic painting of her early teachers at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League in New York. "I had to create an equivalent for what I was looking at not copy it," she's been quoted as saying.

The way was indicated by Arthur Wesley Dow of Columbia University's Teachers College. Dow taught that refining subjects into harmonious arrangements of colors, tonal contrasts and lines is the most effective way to articulate personal ideas and feelings -- art's principal goal. O'Keeffe tested Dow's ideas in a 1915 series of charcoal abstractions, one of which, "Early No. 2," appears in the show.

The charcoal drawings, exhibited the following year at New York's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (also known as 291), changed O'Keeffe's life. Artistically, their linear networks defining organic-looking shapes foreshadowed her later paintings. Privately, O'Keeffe began a lifelong relationship with the gallery's owner/director, photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who became her promoter, protector and, in 1924, her devoted spouse.

Landscapes in the exhibit continue Dow's teaching by emphasizing strong, integrated design. What distinguishes O'Keeffe's painting -- and separates it from Abstract Expressionism -- is the delicate balance she achieves between representation and abstraction. Shapes are highly simplified and thinly painted in flat, even colors with subtle shading. At once depictive and non-representational, stripped-down landscape elements are conduits for powerful feeling.

O'Keeffe's views of New Mexico, which she visited often after 1929, and where she made her home in 1946, portray deserts, canyons, mesas and hills. Examples include "Red Hills with the Pedernal" (1936), "Trees, Abiquiu VII" (1951) and "Canyon Country" (circa 1965). "In the Patio II" (1948) demonstrates O'Keeffe's characteristic balance by simultaneously describing a

windowed adobe wall and suggesting a minimalist abstraction.

Other landscapes are views of the Texas panhandle and Hawaii. Disconcertingly, given the exhibit's focus on "Sublime Landscape," a relatively meager array of actual landscape paintings appears. Fewer than half the items on view are landscapes by O'Keeffe. Other paintings are still lifes, such as "Yellow Cactus" (1929), one of the magnified-flower pictures with which she achieved her initial fame. Rounding out the exhibit are photo portraits of O'Keeffe by Todd Webb and Stieglitz, also represented by a series of cloud portraits.

Maybe the exhibit's organizer's experienced difficulties amassing landscapes. Whatever the stumbling block, absent abundant supportive material, the exhibit's central argument falls somewhat flat.

%%bodyend%%IF YOU GO: The University of Michigan Museum of Art is at 525 South State St. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday (until 9 p.m. Thursday) and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. For more information, call (734) 763-8662.

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