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ENTERTAINMENT

Desert sublimity

Two Eiteljorg exhibitions trace O'Keeffe's transcendent art

By **S.L. Berry**
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"When I stand alone with the earth and sky, a feeling of something in me going off in every direction into the unknown of infinity means more to me than anything any organized religion gives me." -- Georgia O'Keeffe

In 1941, painter Georgia O'Keeffe left the skyscraper canyons of New York for the wide-open deserts of New Mexico. It was a move that forever changed her art and her life.

Those changes are reflected in the 39 paintings that make up "Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of the Sublime" and "The Infinite O'Keeffe," a pair of exhibitions opening Saturday at the Eiteljorg Museum.

O'Keeffe (1887-1986) grew up in Wisconsin knowing she was going to become an artist. After high school, she moved to New York to study at the Art Students League, making the city her home for nearly 30 years.

She discovered New Mexico on vacation in 1929, where she began spending her summers before finally settling there 12 years later. The exhibitions focus on O'Keeffe's relationship with her surroundings in the desert.

"O'Keeffe was inspired by the light and the landscape in New Mexico," said James Nottage, the Eiteljorg's vice president and chief curator. "But it was the details that surrounded her -- the rocks and bones and bits of wood, the things that she never would have had in other locations -- that she found especially inspiring."

That inspiration led O'Keeffe to express (through images) her sense of the sublime -- that is, that things in the landscape around her suggested



"Red Hills With the Pedernal" (1939) is among the paintings in "Visions of the Sublime" that show how the desert inspired Georgia O'Keeffe. "I found that I could say things with color and shapes," said the artist, "that I couldn't say in any other way." -- Photo provided by the Eiteljorg Museum

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: VISIONS OF THE SUBLIME AND THE INFINITE O'KEEFFE

- **Where:** Eiteljorg Museum, 500 W. Washington St.
- **When:** Saturday through April 3.
- **Info:** (317) 636-9378 or www.eiteljorg.org.

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something more lofty or exalted. The 34 paintings in "Visions of the Sublime" arose from her interest in the grandeur of the world as suggested in its details.

Consider, for example, the flowers, rocks, wood and bones that often found their way into her paintings. O'Keeffe once said that she put those types of objects in her work "to say what is to me the wideness and wonder of the world as I live in it."

"Visions of the Sublime" includes images of objects, rivers and horizons, as well as the Southwest landscapes she loved. To capture the emotions that being out in the deserts and mountains evoked in her, O'Keeffe used both realism and abstraction -- there are examples of both in the show.

What may surprise museum visitors, said Nottage, is that some of the works come from other places and times in O'Keeffe's life. For example, some images were done during a period she spent in Hawaii, where she also observed and recorded what she regarded as intimations of the sublime.

The exhibit also includes works by American painters such as Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and James Abbott McNeill Whistler -- all of whom used the sublime as the basis for making art -- and 25 photos by O'Keeffe's husband, New York photographer and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz.

The companion exhibition, "The Infinite O'Keeffe," focuses on the artist's attempts to explore the infinite through imagery -- for example, the blue sky as seen through the hole in the bleached pelvis bone of an animal she picked up in the desert.

O'Keeffe once explained that she started painting pelvic bones because she was interested in the holes in the bones, or, more precisely, what she saw when she held the bones up and looked through the holes.

". . . particularly the blue from holding them up in the sun against the sky. They were most wonderful against the blue -- that blue that will always be there as it is now after all man's destruction is finished."

There are five paintings in "The Infinite O'Keeffe," as well as photographs by such O'Keeffe contemporaries as Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham, both of whom explored the concept of infinity through their images.

Unlike past exhibitions that have focused on O'Keeffe's artistic interpretations of flowers and bones, these shows look at her work from a more spiritual perspective.

"We're showing you what she saw and how she expressed the sublime and infinite," said Nottage. "She's an extraordinary artist, and I think people can get a deeper appreciation of her through these shows."

Or, as O'Keeffe once said, "I found that I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way -- things that I had no words for."

Nottage also hopes visitors will leave the exhibitions with a greater understanding of what to expect from the Eiteljorg in the future.

The museum is undergoing a \$20 million expansion that will add 45,000 square feet of new gallery and education spaces to the existing facility, which is going to affect the museum's exhibitions and public programming.

"I hope people will see the O'Keeffe shows as an example of what a lively, stimulating place the Eiteljorg is to visit," said Nottage.

Call Star reporter S.L. Berry at (317) 444-6437.