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- News
- Sports
- Business
- Columnists
- Entertainment
- Life
- Opinion
- Odd News
- Multimedia
- Special Reports
- Obituaries
- Corrections

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 - Text Only
 - Mobile
- Classifieds
 - Classifieds
 - E-mmediates
 - Job Quest
 - Cars.com
 - Apartments.com
 - HomeHunter.com
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 - Coupons
 - Place an Ad
- Site Map
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O'Keeffe bends us to her vision

By Donald Munro / The Fresno Bee

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More than a river runs through the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum. The show might not be chock full of the images you first associate with the artist — the close-ups of flowers, the dreamy abstracts, the bleached animal skulls floating against otherworldly landscapes — but there's enough of a smattering of periods and styles to give a taste of her prodigious and varied output.

Still, I keep coming back to the river.

I bend to its ways. I'm hooked by, well, its hook.

In 1935, O'Keeffe painted "Blue River (Chama River, Ghost Ranch)," a favorite vista of hers in her beloved New Mexico. (Scouting for property, O'Keeffe's assistant, Maria Chabot, wrote to her: "Do you remember the great curve of the Chama? That is the only place for our town house.")

The painting is defiantly vertical. Near the top we see the dramatic bend of the river. I can't really call it gentle; I think of it more as comfortable. The bend reminds me of the way a coat hanger fits perfectly over the rod in a closet. By the lower half of the painting, the river has widened to fill the entire frame. The water, swirled with white, suggests the shallow depth of a sandbar. No longer do we have the banks of the Chama to guide our perspective. It's as if O'Keeffe has plopped us, waist-deep, in the river as it churns by. As I look at the scene, my first reaction is volume. Not just of the water in the river itself. I'm thinking of volume

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What: "Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of the Sublime"

When: Through Jan. 2

Where: Fresno Metropolitan Museum

Admission: \$8 general, \$5 students and seniors

Details: (559) 441-1444, www.fresnomet.org

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in terms of space, of vastness, of pressure, even — the kind of stuff you figure out in high school physics class when you learn that air isn't exactly weightless.

It's as if I can feel the bigness of O'Keeffe's landscapes, the way the sky seems to press down upon you, the way that mountains and trees seem to have a weight of their own. She once said that in her depictions of landscape, she sought to put visual form to the "feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill."

In other words, O'Keeffe doesn't ever seem dainty. There's a hardness to her — a certainty, a muscularity — that permeates her work even when she's depicting the most delicate botanical theme. In her biography of O'Keeffe, Hunter Drohojowsky-Philp writes of one of O'Keeffe's cats in the New Mexico desert that would catch rats and eat only the heads, leaving the other half for her kittens. Ever frugal, O'Keeffe kept the leftover half-rats in the icebox to be "consumed by kittens as needed."

That's one tough cookie. When you look at Todd Webb's photographic portraits of O'Keeffe later in life — they are a fascinating addition to the exhibition — her nonsense personality seems to radiate into the room, as if to say, "Don't even think of brushing me off as a flower-painting lightweight."

But back to the river. Here's where the show gets really interesting for me. To the immediate right of "Blue River" is another painting by O'Keeffe depicting what appears to be the same scene, this one from 1964: "From the River — Light Blue." Almost 30 years separate the two.

This version is noticeably different. It's much more abstract; the river's banks and scattered foliage have blended into a pure, sandy color. The water, likewise, is less representational in style. It's a thick swath of blue, with a hint of lighter blue suggesting the shallowness near the shore. What's more, the perspective is completely different. Instead of feeling like you're right there in the river, this latter work is an overhead view. We're looking down on the scene.

The bend in the river is the same, however. There's still that distinctive hook that reminds me, even more, of that snugly fitting hanger. By boiling the scene down to essential shape and color — and by imposing an overhead omnipotence to the view — O'Keeffe in simple strokes conveys the magnitude and majesty of the New Mexico landscape.

This different perspective reflects the impact of air travel on O'Keeffe's art. Simply put, flying in a plane wowed her from the first time she got up in the air. In a letter to Chabot, the artist wrote, "What one sees from the air is so simple and so

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beautiful, I cannot help feeling that it would do something wonderful for the human race — rid it of much smallness and pettiness if more people flew."

I've often had similar thoughts — though not as eloquently formed — when I've flown myself. Looking down on the ground from 30,000 feet, the vastness of the terrain and the chaotic eloquence of nature makes anything man-made seem downright puny.

In her 1962 painting "Sky Above White Clouds I," also part of the Fresno exhibition, O'Keeffe reflects this almost giddy fascination with air travel. It's almost breathtakingly simple in composition: a huge band of white as glimpsed from the window of a plane, with a dreamy "horizon" line where the cloud stops and the pale blue-green colors of a wispy sky stretch upward.

I can only be thankful that she lived in a century where she had the privilege to fly. Think what DaVinci or Turner would have given for that chance.

This from-the-air grandeur is the real strength of this exhibition. Getting into the sky seemed a fitting way for O'Keeffe to progress in her career; flying allowed her to paint even bigger than before, if not necessarily in size but in scope.

O'Keeffe's close-up flower paintings are nice, and there is a fine example in "Visions of the Sublime" (although if you have your heart set on them you might be disappointed in an exhibition that's more geared to landscapes). But think wide-angle when you catch this show. I'll take the bend in the river — and that big, broad, never-ending O'Keeffe sky — any day.

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