



ANN ARBOR'S  
ENTERTAINMENT MONTHLY

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## November 2004

### DAILY LISTINGS

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
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21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

### MONTHLY LISTINGS

**Concerts**  
Musical events

**Cinema**  
Films and movies

**On Stage**  
Comedy, Dance, Theater,  
Outlying Areas and Auditions

**Alternatives**  
Readings, Poetry, Lectures,  
Stories & Miscellaneous events

**On Display**  
Gallery displays

### GUIDES

**Venues**  
Places to hear music

**2003-04 Local Music Directory**  
Band descriptions and contact info : watch for it in November

**2003-04 Restaurant Guide**



### In Search of a Form for the Infinite

## Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape at UMMA

*by Stefan Kiesbye*

Although Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is considered one of the most iconic painters of the 20th century, the Great Lakes region hasn't seen a major exhibition of her work in the last 25 years. And while images of her most famous bleached bones or enlarged blossoms are sold at every Borders or local gift shop, on mugs, posters and greeting cards, not many are aware of O'Keeffe's range and the concepts underlying her paintings.

"She is one of those artists with such name recognition, it's like doing an Impressionism exhibition," explains University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) Curator Carole McNamara. "Everybody says, 'Oh, I already know about her. There's nothing more to learn.'"

Yet McNamara begs to differ. The show -- organized by Joseph Czestochowski and made possible by the assistance of the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation and numerous collections -- positions her as a landscape painter and places her in the tradition of the sublime, an 18th-century aesthetic concept. The show, which opens July 11 and runs through September 26, is promoted by UMMA, displays work "which associates feelings of fear, gloom, and awe with landforms of immense scale and size," encouraging viewers to see O'Keeffe as more than a strictly modern artist.

"Her images, in no way, can be seen as an updated Impressionism," McNamara claims. "They are very much internal explorations, not just reflecting back what you can see with the optic nerve."

O'Keeffe had tremendous success during her own lifetime. After an education that included stops at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League, New York, she broke into the art world in the mid- to late-1910s. Showing at the renowned photographer and art

Local dining experiences : check the new version out in October

### **Best of Washtenaw 2004**

This is what you like : check the new champs every April

### **2004 Annual Fiction and Poetry Contest**

Winners and honorable mentions online for reading : look for them in June

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impresario Alfred Stieglitz's New York galleries, she soon roused the interest of her generation. Modernism had made its way from Europe to America, and O'Keeffe was able not to get caught up in any of the prevalent movements of her time, but to develop her very own brand of painting.

When in 1924 Stieglitz divorced his wife of over 20 years and married O'Keeffe, one of the most dynamic artist couples was formed. O'Keeffe wrote, "I feel that some of the photography being done on America today is more living, more vital, than the painting." Stieglitz exhibited his wife's work throughout his lifetime (he died in 1946), and her work sold well and at high prices. The intimate portraits of O'Keeffe, which Stieglitz took and exhibited, helped to make her a star. Artist and work melted harmoniously into one product.

Many early landscapes depicted New York City and Lake George, but O'Keeffe is best remembered for her paintings of New Mexico, its deserts inspiring the animal skulls and bones found that their way into her pictures. She once wrote, "They are strangely more living than the animals walking around -- hair, eyes and all with their tails switching. The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable -- and knows no kindness with all its beauty."

Critics of her early work panned her as clinical, yet it is exactly this cool, seemingly heartless understatement, that lends her work such power. In her compositions, bones and Penitente crosses become symbols for the New Mexico landscape. As art historian Lisa Messinger has pointed out, "the skull assumes great mystical power, as if it were a sacred relic. By infusing her painting with subliminal religious undertones, O'Keeffe reinforced the symbolic import of such imagery and the sacredness of American landscape in general."

In 1949, three years after Stieglitz's death, O'Keeffe moved permanently to New Mexico. She continued to paint near Taos and received many awards, including the Medal of Freedom. In 1971, she lost most of her vision and only retained peripheral sight. And while she still worked in watercolor and pencil, she turned her attention to clay. She died in 1986, at the age of 98.

Sometimes an artist's iconic status can lead to oversimplifications and reductions of their work -- Monet, Rothko, and Warhol come to mind. These artists have attained rock-star status, and they often pay the price with exhibitions which are the equivalent of Greatest Hits compilations. Their work, cut down to fit, has become comfort food for

the leisurely art consumer.

In Georgia O'Keeffe's case, her status might be the shadow that blacks out some of her finer work. Art critic MaLin Wilson even been argued that many of O'Keeffe's paintings look better in glossy reproduction, that the originals look "too small with dry, thin, parched strokes." Yet McNamara calls every reproduction -- no matter the artist -- a "lie." Formats, made to fit a page or postcard, are arbitrary, and colors can be deceiving, or simply off. She is convinced that O'Keeffe's appeal will never fade, and that only now we are coming to understand the depths and influence of her work.

In addition to the 35 examples of O'Keeffe's own work, the exhibit displays photographs of Alfred Stieglitz and Todd Webb, as well as paintings by Albert Bierstadt, Martin Johnson Heade and George Inness. For admirers and aficionados of O'Keeffe's art, the catalogue, apart from many "lies" (color and duotone plates), include essays from noted art historians and O'Keeffe scholars, explaining the connection of the artist's work with earlier concepts of the sublime.

McNamara believes that this new way of looking at O'Keeffe's work will be challenging even to viewers who are familiar with her paintings. The show is not the swan song of a famous painter, but a fresh start for understanding the complex simplicity of a great and unique artist.

*Additional information culled from Christopher Merrill and Ellen Bradbury's book From the Faraway Nearby: Georgia O' Keeffe as Icon (Addison-Wesley, 1992). "Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape" runs July 11-September 26 at the Univeristy of Michigan Museum of Art, located at 525 S. State Street. For more information, call 764-0395, or visit [www.umma.umich.edu](http://www.umma.umich.edu).*

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