THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

LANDSCAPE AND THE NATURAL OBJECT IN THE PAINTINGS OF GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

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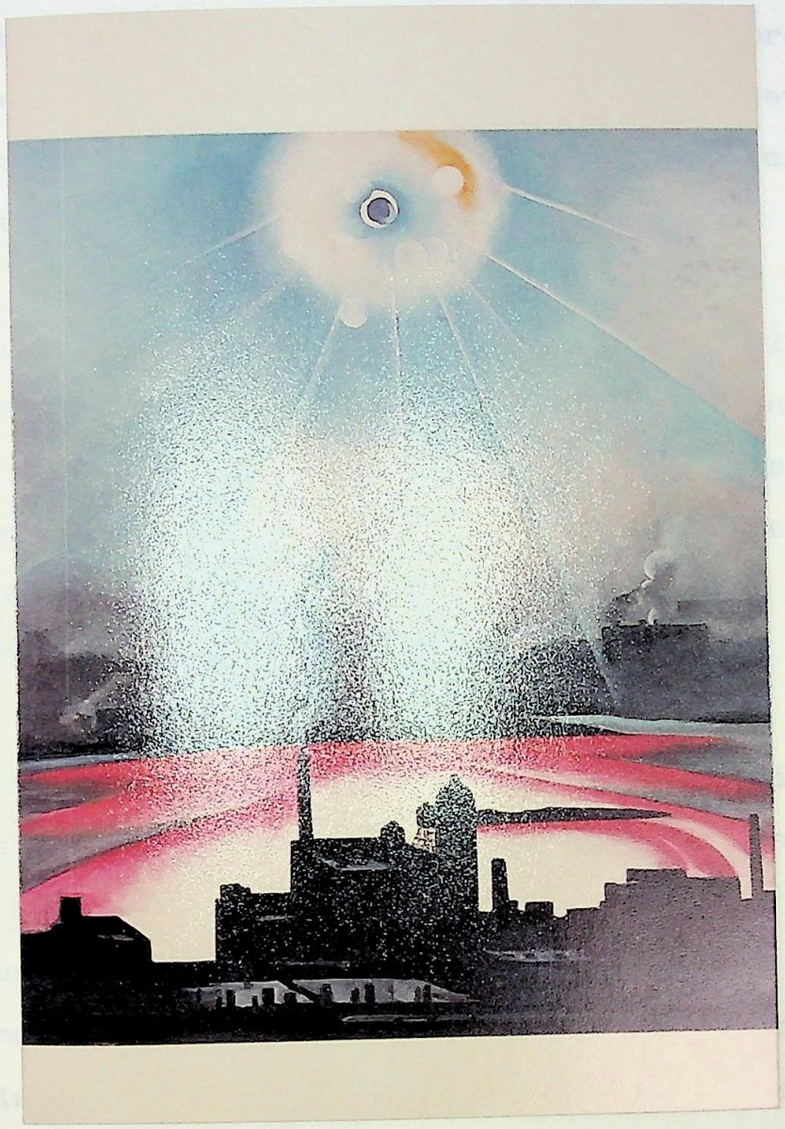
INTRODUCTION

The paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe have their primary source in nature, whether in landscape, natural objects, or nature-based abstraction, where the presence of the natural object remains evident in her use of forms relating to those of her objective work. Her approach to this imagery through modernist language has changed and developed showing different uses of media and viewpoint. She has frequently used close-up or selective viewpoints which have intensified and concentrated her concern with the natural object.

O'Keeffe's painting has been closely connected to her own life, and most particularly to the places where she has lived. Her art has derived from her physical environment and the natural elements it has contained. For much of her life she has lived in the American Southwest concentrating on the landscape itself. However, even the work she produced while living in New York shows a retention of contact with nature. Through paintings of flowers and shells blown up to fill the canvas she retained the presence of nature in her work as if these objects could replace the absence of the land. O'Keeffe's images of New York are less concerned with human presences in the city than the light which filters through the forms of the buildings and streets (Figure 1). Paintings of buildings in the land are equally concerned with the relation of the man-made object and the natural environment - stark New England barns in snow or the heavy,



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curving shapes of the church at Taos, New Mexico, appear as extensions of their natural surroundings.

The purpose of this thesis is to study the paintings in themselves, to examine O'Keeffe's approaches to natural imagery through differing media and viewpoints to find how images of landscape, natural objects and nature-based abstraction are related in her work. However, before turning to the paintings it seems first necessary to examine general views of nature and landscape in art in this century which have derived from nineteenth century romanticism. O'Keeffe and the other artists of the 291 group with which she is associated have been placed in this tradition and their own ideas show a derivation from nineteenth century traditions.

I have worked almost entirely from the paintings reproduced in the book "Georgia O'Keeffe" which was compiled in 1976. It has been suggested that she has kept figurative work and abstractions from public view,[1] but in the absence of definite information on this it seems best to take what O'Keeffe herself has chosen to represent her long and prolific career.

Footnotes

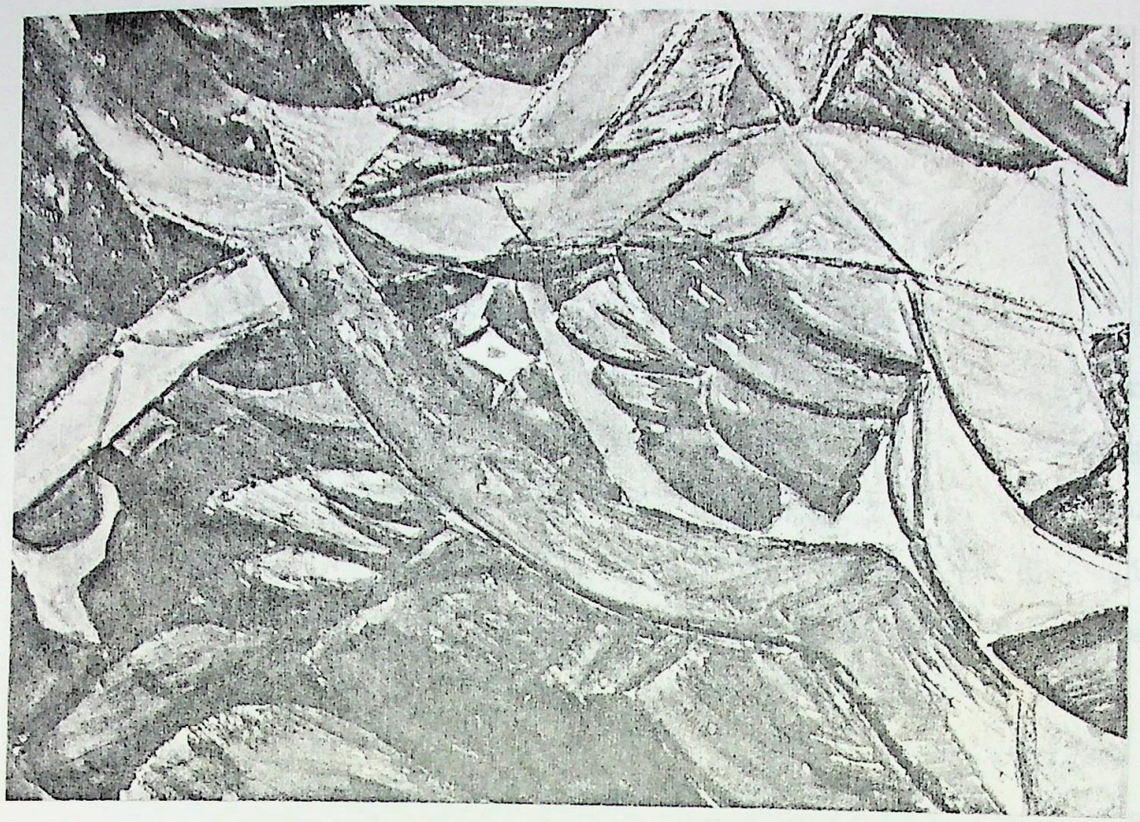
[1]Eleanor Munro has suggested that: "O'Keeffe has managed cannily to keep her figure paintings off the market to enhance her single image as a nature painter." Originals: American Women Artists, p. 490.

CHAPTER I:

The 291 Group and Nature Romanticism

Georgia O'Keeffe's concern with natural imagery was shared by other painters of the 291 group with which she is generally associated.[1] Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in New York was established in 1905 as both an exhibition space and an open meeting place for artists. Stieglitz was a charismatic figure devoted to promoting modernist art in America and between 1905 and 1917 he exhibited work by Matisse, Cezanne, Brancusi, Picasso and Rodin. However, his primary concern was to encourage and promote American artists and establish American avant-garde art as a voice in itself, distinct from European art. The artists most notably associated with 291 were Arthur Dove, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Max Weber and Georgia O'Keeffe but 291 was less a distinct movement than a group of individuals sharing similar ideas. The mood in American art at this time was one of optimism and idealism and Stieglitz himself appeared to embody these feelings. Apart from organizing 291's exhibitions Stieglitz also worked on his own photography and edited the magazine Camera Work which he developed as an outlet for ideas current at 291.[2]

Stieglitz was dedicated to modernism and art as an experimental process yet regarded it as a sensory activity of human feelings rather than an intellectual concern. He claimed that:



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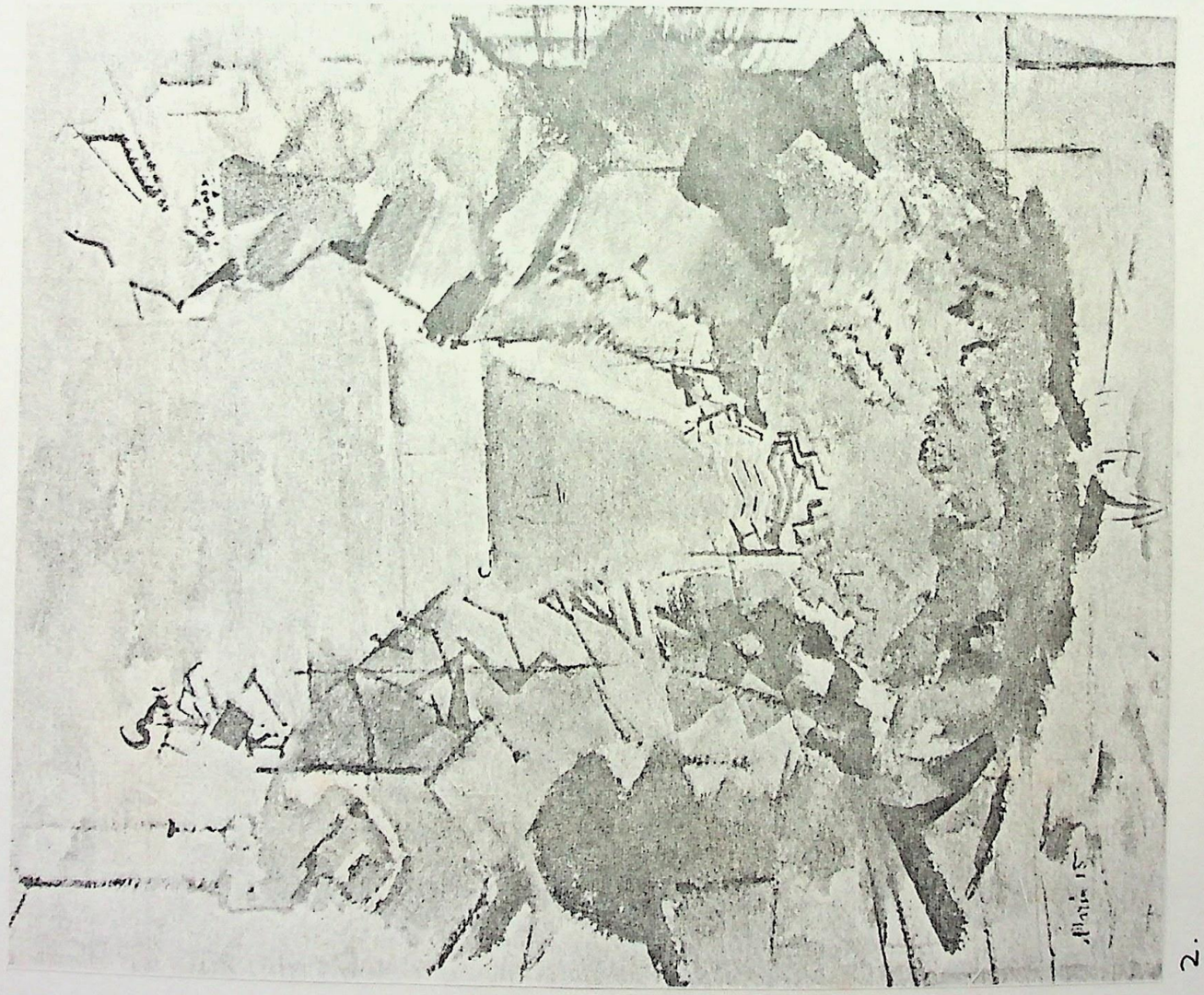

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> "I detest superstitions that go against life, against truth, against the reality of experience, against the spontaneous living out of the sense of wonder - of fresh experience, freshly seen and communicated."[3]

Stieglitz's ideas were shared by the 291 artists. Conscious of their identity as Americans they had a similar desire to establish independent American forms in art, viewing art as a liberating force which emphasized the individual.[4] The predominance of natural imagery amongst the 291 painters reflects these ideas and ambitions: the freedom of the artist mirrored in the freedom the natural world seems to offer as opposed to cultural constraints, the presence of nature as a vehicle to tap the primitive world of the senses, the "sense of wonder" evoked by the light, colours and infinite forms of nature as a touchstone for spiritual feeling. Nature could be viewed as an external mirror for the internal life of the artist which could be emphasized by the use of modernist abstract language which stressed the new, the individual and the internal (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

The ideas expressed by Stieglitz and the 291 painters, however, have their roots in nineteenth century romanticism. Sam Hunter states that:

> "It is remarkable that Alfred Stieglitz could have held in balance the conflicting claims of nature romanticism and European formalism. His great contribution, indeed, was to relate the European sense of art to his own romantic individualism and to that of his artists. He understood the experimental as part of the American's inalienable right to seek new expressions of creative liberty and he gave this search moral and idealogical overtones."[5]

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In the nineteenth century landscape had emerged as a serious subject in itself, no longer a background for human activity but nature as a force which could confront the artist with the immensity and grandeur of the world. Nineteenth century romanticism found in nature an expression of human spirituality evoked by this scale and power before which man is diminished.[6] These feelings were to be located in places remote and dramatic in themselves - the Swiss Alps, the English Lake District - places apart from ordered rural landscape. In these wild places the play of light and the elements could evoke feelings of mystery and wonder.[7]

In America painters had also turned to their native land with a similar spirit. Such painters as Thomas Cole, John Kensett and Frederic Edwin Church produced images of the American landscape which heightened and intensified its intrinsic scale and grandeur. The American land was opened up in the nineteenth century as a seemingly boundless area of immense shows of nature - the Grand Canyon, Niagara, the Great Plains - towards which painters were inevitably drawn. Robert Hughes describes the mood of American romanticism as follows:

> "Throughout the nineteenth century America seemed to be a repository of sublime landscape effects, from the solitude of the forests... to the Edenic expanse of the plains... the prevailing tone of the American Romantic landscape was less a description of the troubled self than a sustained homage to vastness and antiquity."[8]

The romantic tradition of spiritual feeling located in nature has continued into this century, and while the other painters of the 291 group showed this inheritance in their own views and work, Georgia O'Keeffe has particularly shown the continuation of romanticism in the attention given to her own life and work. O'Keeffe's identification with the landscape of the American West has placed her in a tradition which derives meaning from previous ideas of this land through, what Lawrence Alloway has termed,

> ....."cultural reflexes which continue to identify the sublime with the big country."[9]

O'Keeffe has developed a powerful personal image which points to aspects of how nature is viewed in this century. She inevitably attracted attention as a woman artist showing her work at a time when few others received recognition. Her emergence as a public figure in the 1920s came through her paintings of flowers and attention also centred on the artist herself through the extensive photo-portrait of which Alfred Stieglitz made her subject (Figure 5). Focus on O'Keeffe has since derived from her identification with the land and nature. Her own persona as a stubborn, pioneering matriarch who left New York for the solitude of New Mexico, rejecting the materialism of the city for the remote, primitive beauty of the land suggests that she embodies a nostalgic longing for a mythic American past of the frontier and

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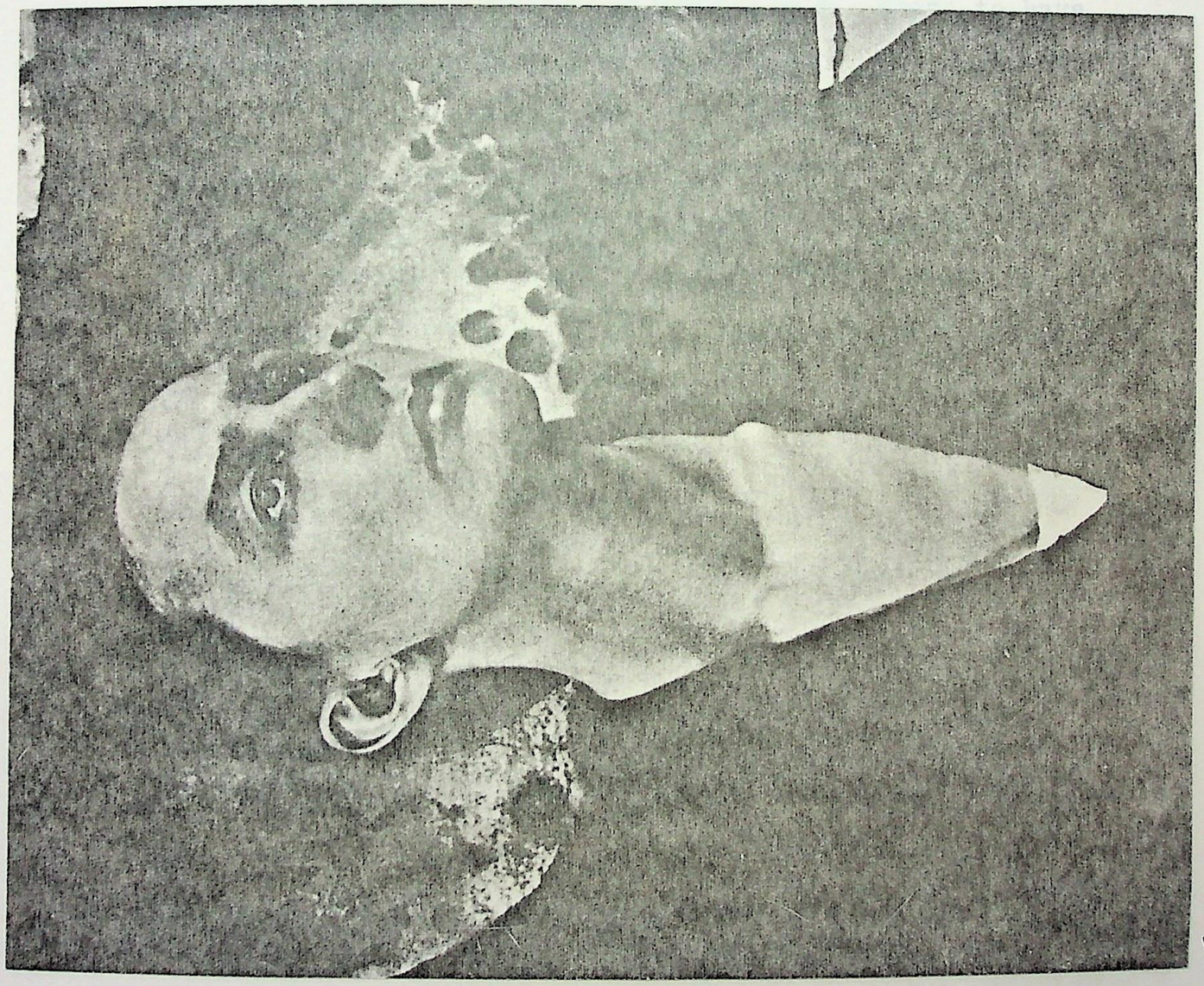

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the virgin land, a need to "return" to nature in order to retrieve what has been "lost".[10] Her own character and appearance have also contributed to this image (Figure 6).

Ironically, O'Keeffe's image seems to have derived from her own attempts to deflect personal attention which she considered as detracting from serious consideration of her work. She has stated:

> "Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest."[11]

O'Keeffe's position in New York art circles seems to have been that of a defensive outsider.[12] This defensiveness would appear to extend to her willingness to leave her work open to interpretation.[13] Her writings consist of spare and mundane stories about the origins of her paintings and deny the essentially ambiguous nature of her images.[14] Yet in her views on nature and landscape she reveals a close link to Stieglitz's own ideas. She refers to:

> "The inexplicable thing in nature that makes me feel the world is big far beyond my understanding - to understand maybe by trying to put it into form. To find the feeling of infinity on the horizon or just over the next hill."[15]

or again:

> "When I found the beautiful white bones on the desert I picked them up and took them home too - I have used these things to say what is to me the wideness and wonder of the world as I live in it."[16]

Here she recalls Stieglitz's call for "the spontaneous living out of the sense of wonder".

These statements suggest that, for O'Keeffe, nature is primarily mysterious and approached through the emotions. However, the attempt to locate spiritual feeling in O'Keeffe's work tends to obscure the actual content of her paintings. While her work reveals an inner relation to the artist through media and the creation of mood through light, particularly in her watercolour landscapes of 1917, O'Keeffe's painting is primarily concerned with physical matter. Through her approach to landscape and the natural object by means varying from naturalistic to abstract she reflects her own experience of landscape and its elements with a concern for its drama and wonder, yet her concerns are essentially for the forms and surfaces of matter. Her paintings show the tactile qualities of soft flower petals or the dry, hard surfaces of shells and bones.

O'Keeffe's painting is characterized by rounded, sinuous forms which run through her work like a signature. Through these forms she creates a connection between natural objects, forms of landscape, the human body and her own non-objective work, suggesting in this a correspondence in organic matter and the ambiguity of such forms. Eleanor Munro has suggested that:

> ..."she gives us the natural world as it is: a correlative to our own bodies, therefore mysterious, but not a vehicle of mystical spirit."[17]

Finally, it seems best to separate O'Keeffe's work from contemporary spiritual needs and examine it for what it contains in itself.

Footnotes

[1]O'Keeffe first came into contact with 291 as a student in 1907 (see Georgia O'Keeffe) but until her first exhibition in 1916 her contact with Stieglitz and the gallery was as a marginal visitor.

[2]Eugene Meyers described 291 in Camera Work of 1914 as:
"An oasis of real freedom -
A sturdy islet of enduring independence in the besetting seas of Commercialism and Convention -
A rest - when wearied
A stimulant - when dulled
A Relief -
A Negation of Preconceptions
A Forum for Wisdom and for Folly
A Safety valve for repressed ideas -
An Eye Opener
A Test
A Solvent
A Victim and an Avenger."

[3]Quoted in Arthur Dove and Duncan Phillips: Artist and Patron, p. 36.

[4]Dove had written: "I should like to enjoy life by choosing all of its highest instances, to give back in my means of expression all that it gives to me in form and color the reaction that plastic objects and sensations of life from within and without have reflected from my inner consciousness. Theories have been outgrown, the means is disappearing, the reality of the sensation alone remains. It is that in its essence which I wish to set down." Ibid.

[5]Sam Hunter, American Art of the 20th Century, p. 73

[6]"The individual is pitted against or confronted by the overwhelming, incomprehensible immensity of the universe, as if the mysteries of religion had left the rituals of the church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world." Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, p.14.

[7]"In the nineteenth century when more orthodox and systematic beliefs were declining, faith in nature became a form of religion." Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art, p.33

[8]Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New, p. 311

[9]Lawrence Alloway, Topics in American Art since 1945, p.36. This was written with regard to the paintings of Clifford Still and Mark Rothko. Alloway also claims "That the landscape meanings projected onto these big pictures should so consistantly use images of the Continental sublime is significant. It does not imply a real link between the land and the art, but, rather indicates the aesthetic of sublimity being described and half-recognized by its conventional landscape forms." Robert Rosenblum has, in particular, placed O'Keeffe in the Northern Romantic tradition: "Georgia O'Keeffe, for one, often painted the same sublime sites in the American West, describing those breathtaking infinities of unspoiled nature where the absence of human beings prevents us from determining whether we are looking at mountains or mole hills." Rosenblum, p. 201.

[10]"The cult over which she has, unconsentingly, now been made matriarch is, I suggest, the one of Process-in-Nature that has replaced nineteenth century Christianity with its sweeping correspondences between Family, Nation, Nature and Deity." Munro, p. 76.

[11]Georgia O'Keeffe, Georgia O'Keeffe.*

[12]O'Keeffe's writing refer sarcastically to "the men" or "the wise men" and several paintings seem to have been undertaken as grim jokes on "the men". She later recalled her motives for painting The Shanty as follows: "I thought, 'I can paint one of those dismal-colored paintings like the men. I think just for the fun I will try - all low-toned and dreary with the tree beside the door!'" IBid

[13]See Chapter III, p. 30

[14]These writings appear as notes in Georgia O'Keeffe.

[15]O'Keeffe.' .

[16]Ibid.

[17]Munro, p. 490.

* This publication has no page numbers.

CHAPTER II:

The Watercolour Landscapes of 1917

Georgia O'Keeffe's early paintings form a distinct phase in her work during which she concentrated on water-colour painting and these stand apart from her later work in medium, working process and effect. These paintings came out of a time when O'Keeffe was working as an art teacher at West Texas Normal School in Canyon, Texas. She had first visited Texas in 1912 when she took a teaching position in Amarillo and between 1912 and 1917 she taught in Amarillo and Canyon. Her teaching was combined with periods of study with Arthur Dow at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York and Alon Bement at the University of Virginia. Dow and Bement both influenced O'Keeffe's work in exposing her to new ideas and artists in Europe and America. She was encouraged by Bement to study Jerome Eddy's Cubists and Post-Impressionism and Kandinsky's Concerning the Spiritual in Art .

The period from 1912 to 1917 was a time when European avant-garde art was being shown increasingly in New York The Armory Show of 1913 was a highly public and controversial event which introduced Cubist and Fauvist painting to a wide American audience and, as already mentioned, the 291 Gallery was showing European work, although in a less public forum. Although working in Texas O'Keeffe was not out of contact with these developments and during her visits to New York she visited the galleries. Her contact with the work of Arthur Dove interested her in particular. Dove's early abstractions retained the sense of natural forms but worked from these in an independent concern with relations and

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rhythms of form withim the painting (Figure 7).

O'Keeffe's work from 1915 was the result of her wish to develop a personal, individual language amongst these ideas. The influence of Dow's theories on art education seems particularly evident. His teaching became the basis for her methods of undertaking this exploration. William Innes Homer has summarized Dow's theories as follows:

> "Dow had revolutionized the teaching of art by eschewing realism in favor of design based on a few fundamental elements of line, value and color. Students were expected to learn how these could be used in creating beautiful compositions, designs that were not only harmonious but also expressive of a variety of human emotions. Dow had derived many of his principles from the Synthetist painters around Gauguin at Pont-Aven and from Oriental art... Understandably, Dow's emphasis was on flat, decorative composition in a quasi-Oriental mode, not on clever brushwork and descriptive realism."[1]

O'Keeffe followed Dow's principles by taking her work through a process of reduction to basic shapes, using direct media such as charcoal and watercolour.[2] Her aim was to develop a method of expressing in paint,

> ..."things in my head that are not like what anyone has taught me - shapes and ideas so near to me - so natural to my way of being and thinking that it hasn't occured to me to put them down."[3]

The first drawings and watercolours to come out of this exploratory process were abstractions and these early abstractions remain the most minimal and non-referential paintings in her work. They were worked in series until the most satisfactory image was reached (a method O'Keeffe was to continue to use through her later work). Blue Lines (1916) consists of two vertical lines, one straight, one

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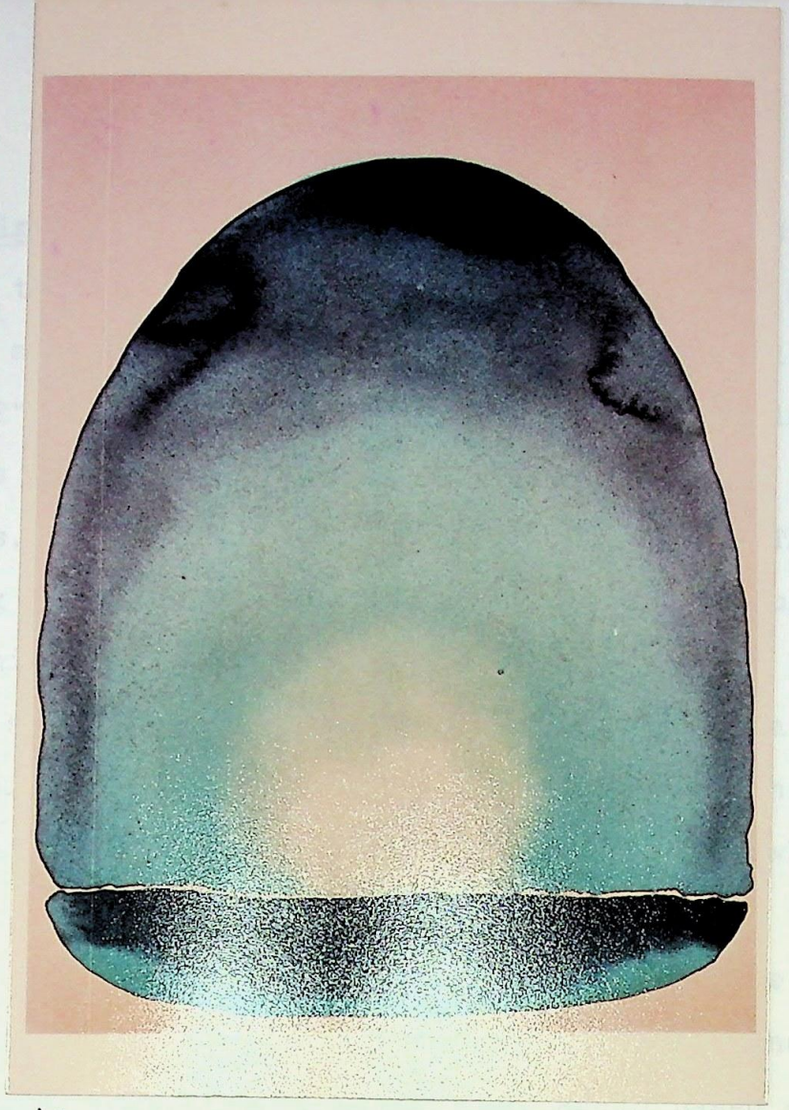
crooked, on a single thick horizontal band (Figure 8). The lines appear to be painted in a single application of the brush and a moment of concentration which has produced the certainty of their balance against one another, their narrowing and swelling and their position against the unpainted white space of the paper. Again, in Blue II, painted in the same year (Figure 9), she paints two rounded shapes above four diagonal brushstrokes with a seemingly casual spontaneity in the fluidity of the paint which masks the precision of the composition. This approach relates to oriental ink paints which also make use of the unpainted areas of a composition, balancing the images contained in this white space. These too are worked directly with the brush, yet perfectly placed.

Following this work in abstraction, O'Keeffe worked from the landscape. Her landscapes of 1917 are equally reductive and use the watercolour medium fluidly and directly, allowing unpainted areas of the paper to be of equal importance in the composition. In their extreme reduction they show a concern with space and light in the landscape of the plains of West Texas. What is conveyed is not an external record of place but the experience of this space and its transient light. The landscape in these paintings in indicated only by the horizontal earth/sky division and the sky dominates the images as the landscape becomes a theatre of light.

These paintings were carried out from memory of O'Keeffe's experiences walking in the land, yet convey an immediacy which comes largely from the nature of the watercolour medium as rapid, direct and fluid and a medium of transparency and light. Light is found within the paper itself, coming through the paint as light comes through the atmosphere. Used directly and loosely, as in Blue II, there is an element of spontaneity and calculated risk in the medium in that each application of paint is final and cannot be re-worked.

In Light coming on the Plains II (1917, Figure 10) the medium is used in this way to evoke a transitory moment of light about to break over the horizon and expand, filling the space of the painting. The image consists simply of land and sky, divided by a jagged horizon line above which the sky is a dome-shaped area hovering over the narrow band of the earth. The composition is formed from the flowing, staining direction of the washes of paint: as the light will spread over the horizon to radiate over the darker areas of sky, the washes of paint circle out from the central point. The fast process of painting is allowed remain evident where the paint has run back from the edges in drying and these accidents form part of the painting in off-setting the symmetry of the composition. The colour used is minimal and muted, ranging from the pale yellow light at the centre of the horizon line to the deep blue of the edge, so that the concentration is on the tonal variation from the centre.



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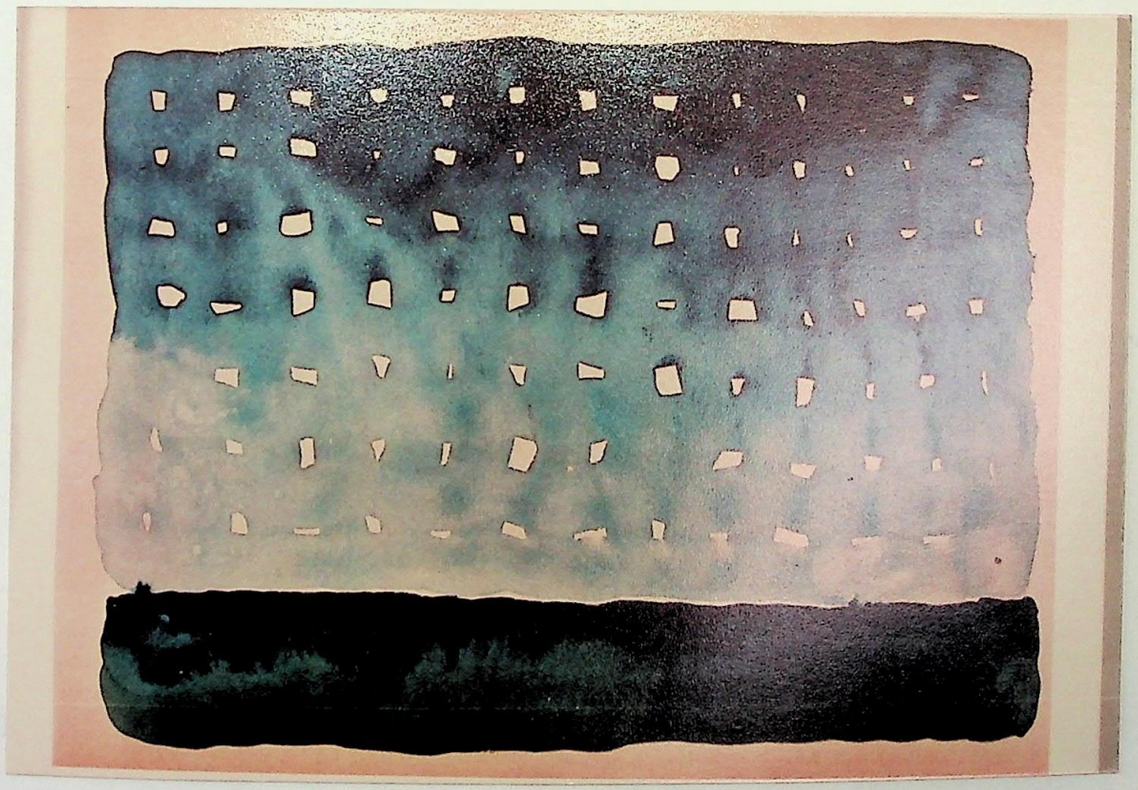

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Light coming on the Plains II in its omission of all but the most basic element of landscape - the horizon - conveys a sense of space that transcends its small scale (9" x 12"). To convey great space on such a scale O'Keeffe has made the formal qualities of the composition push outwards, beyond the limits of its boundaries. The painting expands from the light at the centre, suggesting an infinite continuation. This is also conveyed by the rounded shape of the area of sky against the unpainted margin of paper which allows the image space within its own boundaries, and the symmetry of the composition which carries the idea of endless repetition. She uses this symmetry again in Starlight Night (1917, Figure 11) which has a similar colour range and use of graded washes in a rectangular, horizontal composition, again based on the fundamental areas of earth and sky. In this painting the repetitive pattern of points of light in the sky, represented by unpainted areas of the paper, in an irregular grid, suggests a self-perpetuating image.

In both of these paintings the picture plane is flattened into the two basic areas, earth and sky, and there is no sense of recession towards the dividing horizon line but rather the space depicted seems to expand forward from the ground of the paper towards the viewer. The space of the painting thus encompasses the viewer rather than receding away and remaining within its own enclosure. Ellen H. Johnson has pointed out, with regard to O'Keeffe's

work, that,

> ..."scale is not just a matter of feet and yards but that of the artist's concept and forming."[4]

In Light coming on the Plains II and Starlight Night scale derives from the nature of the land itself and O'Keeffe evokes its open empty space in which sky and light dominate. Through the cool, translucent colour and the balance of the composition the paintings are given a mood of stillness and silence, echoing the experience of the vast, flat plains which she described as "that wide empty country".[5] As light diffuses the specific nature of the landscape it concentrates on a moment in time, in a still semi-darkness.

In the Evening Star series of the same year this mood has changed to movement, energy and excitement in place of meditative stillness. O'Keeffe relates the experience which led to the paintings in direct terms:

> "We often walked away from the town in the late afternoon sunset. There were no paved roads and no fences - no trees - it was like the ocean but it was wide wide land.
> The evening star would be high in the sunset sky. when it was still broad daylight. That evening star fascinated me. It was in some way very exciting to me."[6]

This excitement is conveyed through vibrant primary colour in a range from yellow through orange, red and blue to deep green. The four paintings of the series stand together recording the evolution of the image.

Each painting has the same basic composition: the circle of light in the upper left-hand corner surrounded by

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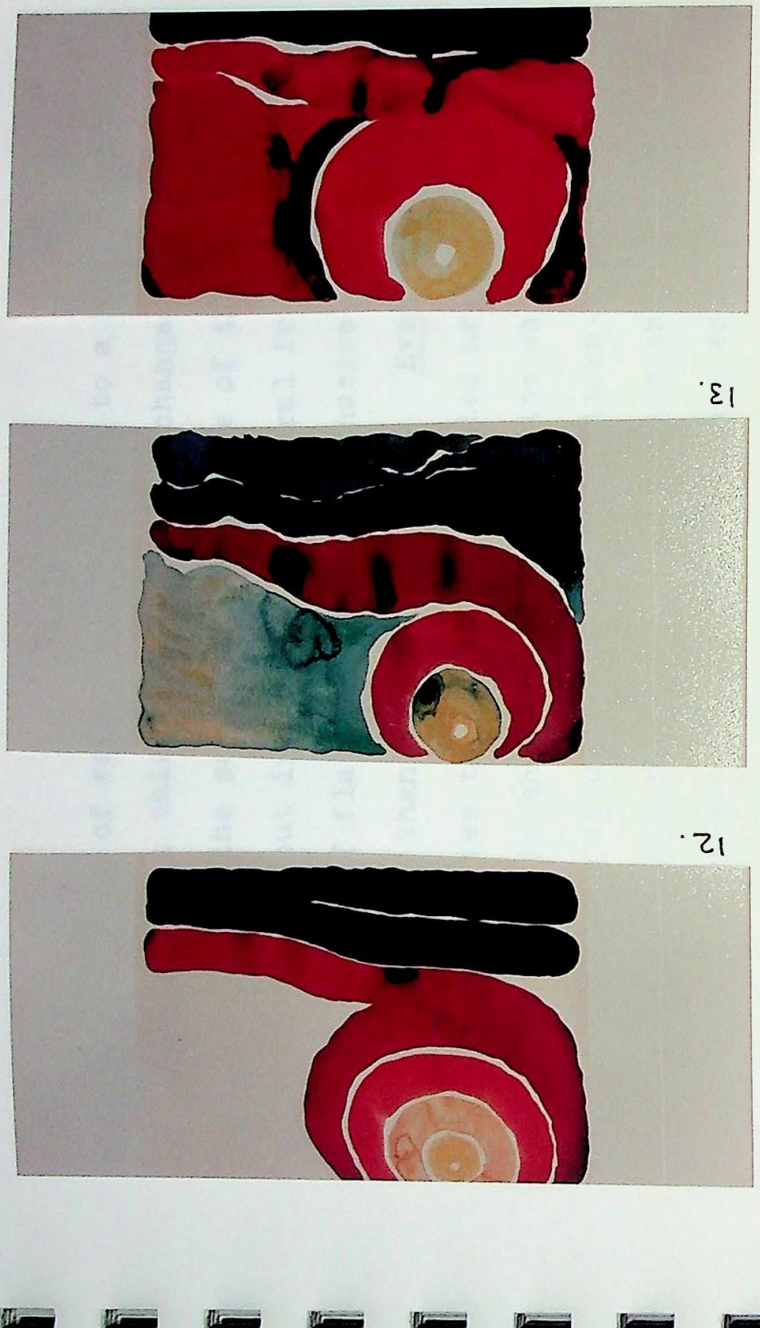

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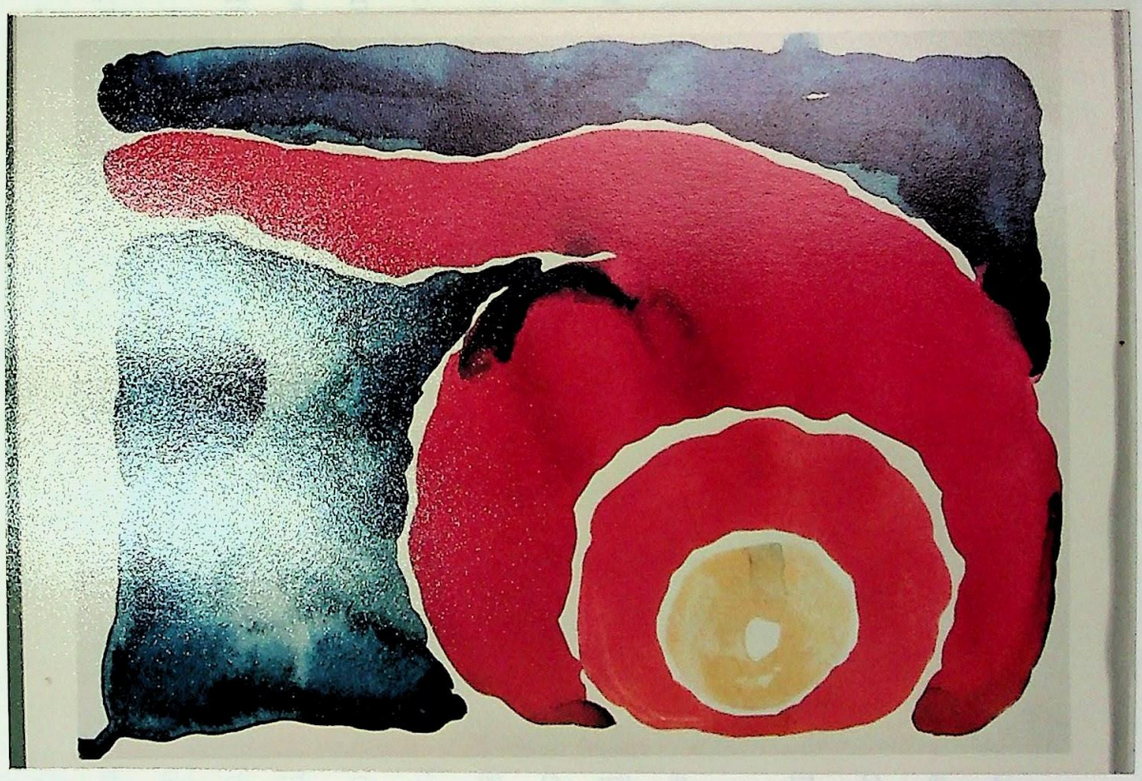

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radiating bands of red which coil down to a horizontal darker area, but this is adjusted and changed through the progression of the series. The essence of the composition remains throughout in the downward spiral from light to dark in areas of flat colour which emphasize the colour contrast rather than tonal variations. Evening Star III (Figure 12) leaves the greatest unpainted area so that each band of colour is sharpely defined by the white lines of unpainted paper around it to form a pattern-like image. These bands have a regular gradation from the yellow of the star to the dark green strip at the lower edge and this regularity makes Evening Star III more static than the subsequent paintings. The intensity of colour contrast increases in Evening Star IV (Figure 13) which fills the entire rectangle of the paper yet still allows the white defining lines remain. In this painting the application of paint appears most uncertain and diluted and the colour is consequently weaker. Evening Star V (Figure 14) concentrates the colour contrast in its coil of red cutting through the deeper blue. The movement of this red spills off to the right of the painting and this red predominates Evening Star VI (Figure 15) in a glowing area of sky over the deep blue of earth along the lower edge of the painting.

In this progression O'Keeffe seems to be searching for the most concentrated image and greatest intensity of colour contrast. By increasing the colour density and reducing the elements of the composition to fewer, larger areas she

increases the movement and the energy of the image. The point of light which is the star becomes bigger and brighter and advances towards the eye. As in Light coming on the Plains II , the act of painting seems to follow the path of the light depicted. The curving stains of colour run and bleed from one area of colour to the next and these paintings appear to remain wet and fluid, their final solution unsettled.

The direct execution of Light coming on the Plains II Starlight Night and the Evening Star series suggests an immediate, emotional response to the experience of light in the landscape yet their formal elements belie this spontaneity. In their creation of space and the balancing of their compositional elements they are as carefully considered as O'Keeffe's abstractions. This precision does not lessen their evocation of mood and emotion through light and colour . These paintings suggest a projection of the internal moods of the artist onto the external reality of the land, her wonder and excitement at the "wide wide land" through a use of paint already learned and familiar. Through the use of medium the presence of the artist is asserted rather than masked and they tell us of O'Keeffe's reaction to the experience of landscape rather than landscape itself.

These paintings remain, to me, O'Keeffe's most direct and personal work. The light, fluid qualities of her painting

are unique to this period of her work and she shows a willingness to experiment which she subsequently abandoned.as her work becomes more technically controlled and precisely ordered. In these early paintings her concerns in working from landscape are less a basis for later work than a separate conclusion.

Footnotes

[1]William Innes Homer, Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde, p.235

[2]Eleanor Munro relates how: "All day she taught classes of Mexican children... Then O'Keeffe would shake off school and walk for a couple of hours. Eventually she would come back to her rented room, sit down on the floor with a drawing board propped against the closet door (a closed door with darkness behind, that was also an opening) and begin to draw. This then was the way to go. She put aside color. That was Dow's first step. Charcoal first to bring the mind down to basics. And then, as she sat there, there came the feeling of what O'Keeffe and other artists have described as a shape in the mind. There were forms that coalesced in her imagination so instinctively and intimately "hers" that she had not thought of putting them onto paper. Originals: American Women Artists, p. 84

[3]Georgia O'Keeffe, Georgia O'Keeffe.

[4]Ellen H. Johnson, Modern Art and the Object, p.129
This sense of large scale remained evident throughout O'Keeffe's work, both in later landscapes and her paintings of flowers. The object always appears large expanding outwards. Johnson also notes that: "Over half a century ago, Georgia O'Keeffe implied that she wished to paint large pictures when she said 'I have kept my pictures small because space in New York necessitated that.'"

[5]O'Keeffe.

[6]Ibid.

CHAPTER III:

The Natural Object and Nature-Based Abstraction

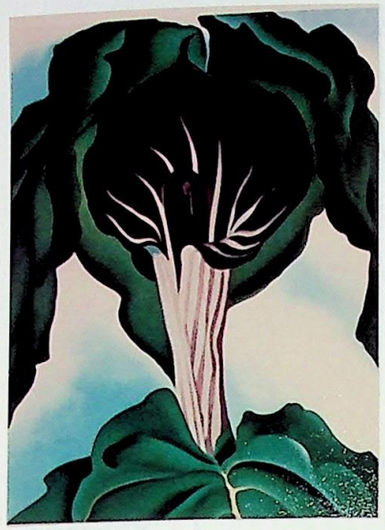
During the years O'Keeffe carried out her watercolours her work had been shown in the 291 Gallery. Stieglitz exhibited her drawings in 1916 and her first one woman exhibition followed in 1917.[1] O'Keeffe had corresponded with Stieglitz through 1917 and in 1918 returned from Texas to join him in New York (they subsequently married in 1924). Her move back to the city marked a change in her painting and she was to concentrate on oil painting from this time on. Her use of paint began to serve a more precise definition of form, emphasizing tonal qualities (an approach which also derived from Dow's teaching).[2] The painting process became no longer as evident as it had been in her use of watercolour. She was also to change her working methods to a more planned approach to painting rather than direct application of fluid paint with the brush.[3] The entire canvas becomes worked in even areas of paint to serve the more illusionistic image. At this time she was also to begin working from different objects which, apart from her series of paintings of New York City in the 1920s, remain rooted in the natural world and, most notably, the flower.

This change in O'Keeffe's work reflects a general trend in art following World War I. The experimentation of the period up to the war was halted as the confidence and idealism of the avant-garde diminished. Sam Hunter has pointed out that:

> "Since the new art was so mystically dedicated to the evolution of 'the true person', and the ideal hopes for fundamental social-spiritual change were suddenly shattered by the war, it was to be expected that the modern art which identified itself with a discredited idealism would also suffer an enormous decline in prestige. That is precisely what happened after the war. The fact that the decline of modernism took a more drastic form in America, that the movement was riddled with more damaging defections here than in Europe, is in part explained by the fact that so much utopian sentiment which had been supporting it was suddenly cut away by the disillusioned mood of the postwar period. Perhaps even more important, however, was the fact that American artists had after all only made a superficial alliance with the new European styles."[4]

For the artists associated with 291 this re-entrenchment was marked by a move away from abstraction, although Dove and O'Keeffe continued to produce non-objective images in conjunction with naturalistic work. John Marin and Marsden Hartley were to concentrate increasingly on the landscape.[5] The 291 Gallery closed in 1917 and although Stieglitz established a new gallery in 1925 the artists of the group had scattered. For O'Keeffe, however, this post-war period coincided with changes in her personal life. She was no longer an art teacher exploring her ideas in her free time, but an exhibiting artist associated with one of the most visible figures in American art at the time. It seems worth condering whether the more "finished" approach to painting and the more detached examination of the object her work showed might have been in response to this change in her life as well as part of a general trend in art.

Throughout the 1920s O'Keeffe's work is dominated by



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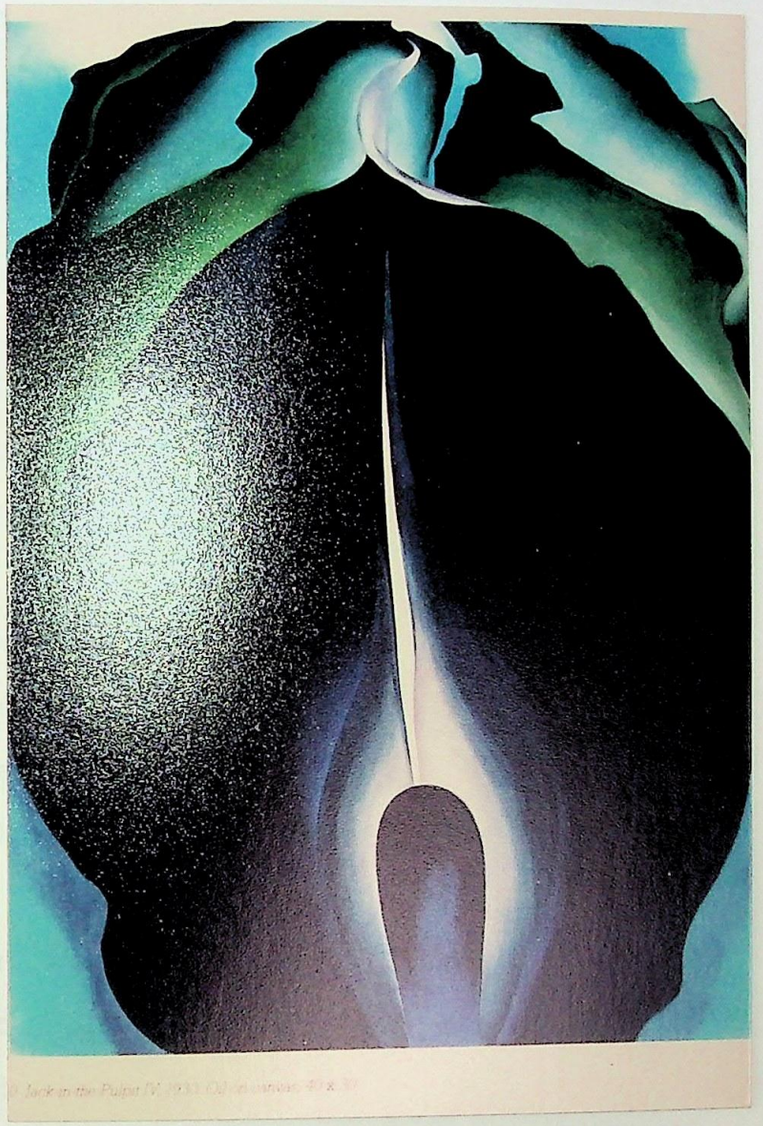

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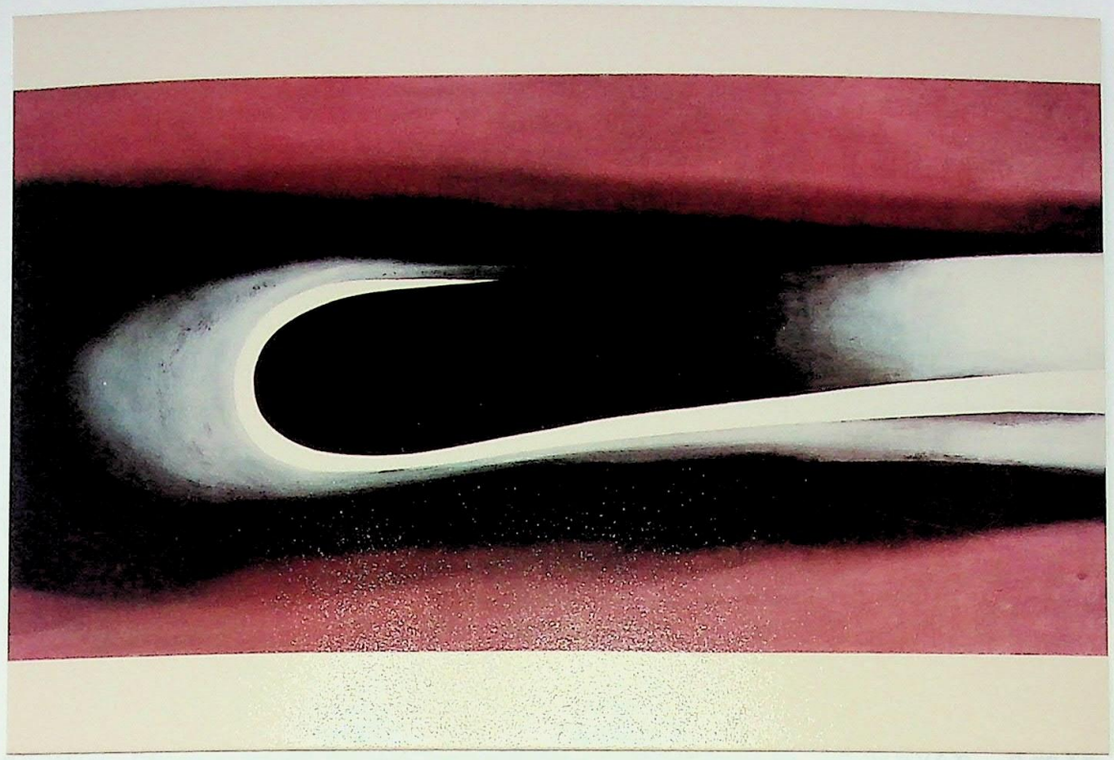
paintings of a single object which is most frequently a flower. Her treatment of the flower isolates one or two flowers from any context, often in an extreme close-up viewpoint which emphasizes the interior of the flower. They appear as objects looked into rather than at and show a process of reduction and simplication which frequently brings them close to abstraction.

This process is best seen in following five paintings from the Jack-in-the-Pulpit series of 1930. These reveal a process of selection and reduction of the forms of the flower progressing to an abstract image. The second and third paintings of the series show the entire flower amongst its leaves (Figures 16 and 17). In the fourth painting, however, the image is concentrated on the dark interior of the flower as though its edges had been peeled back to reveal its centre, the stamen, standing against the petals (Figure 18). Jack-in-the-Pulpit V concentrates on the pattern-like curls of the petals and leaves which scroll down the painting in dark crimson and green folds through which a sourceless white light appears (Figure 19). Jack-in-the-Pulpit VI, the final painting of the series, is the most stark and reduces the image to the black and grey stamen outlined by a white line which rises through the crimson, black and grey background (Figure 20). The white hook-shaped line around the form of the stamen appears as a light located deep inside the flower against which this form is defined.



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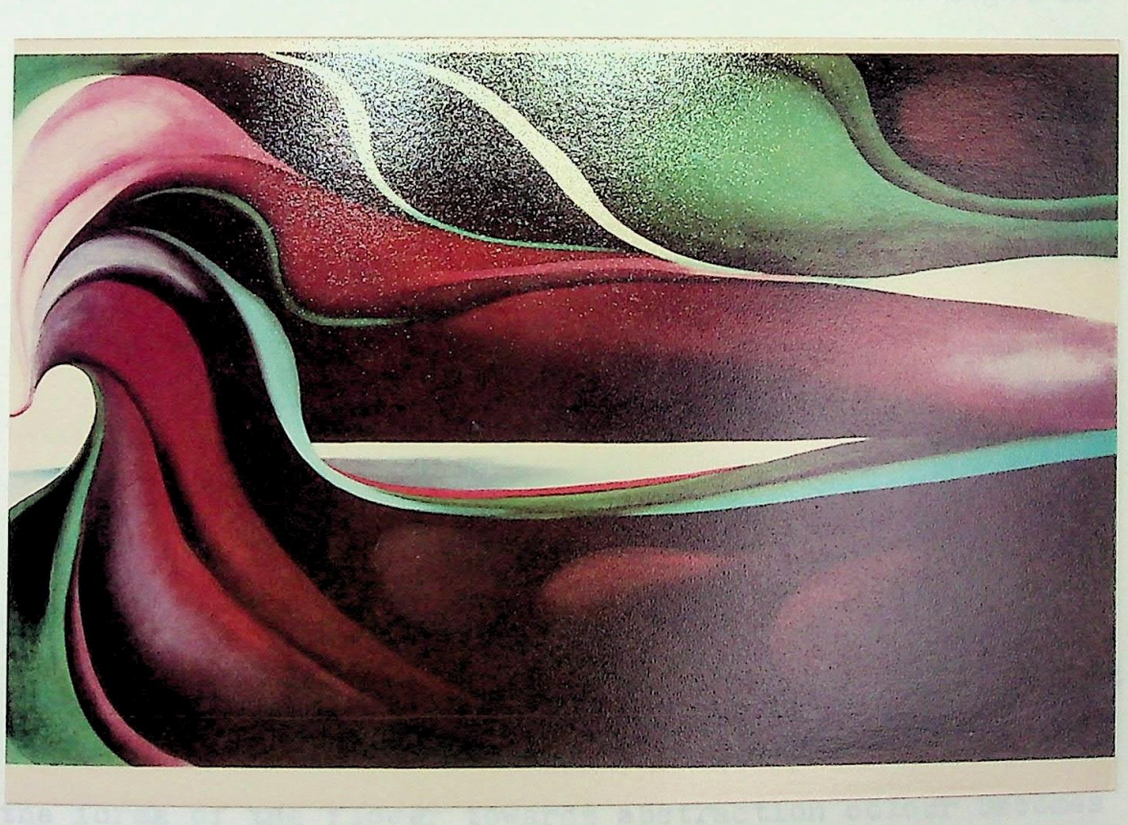

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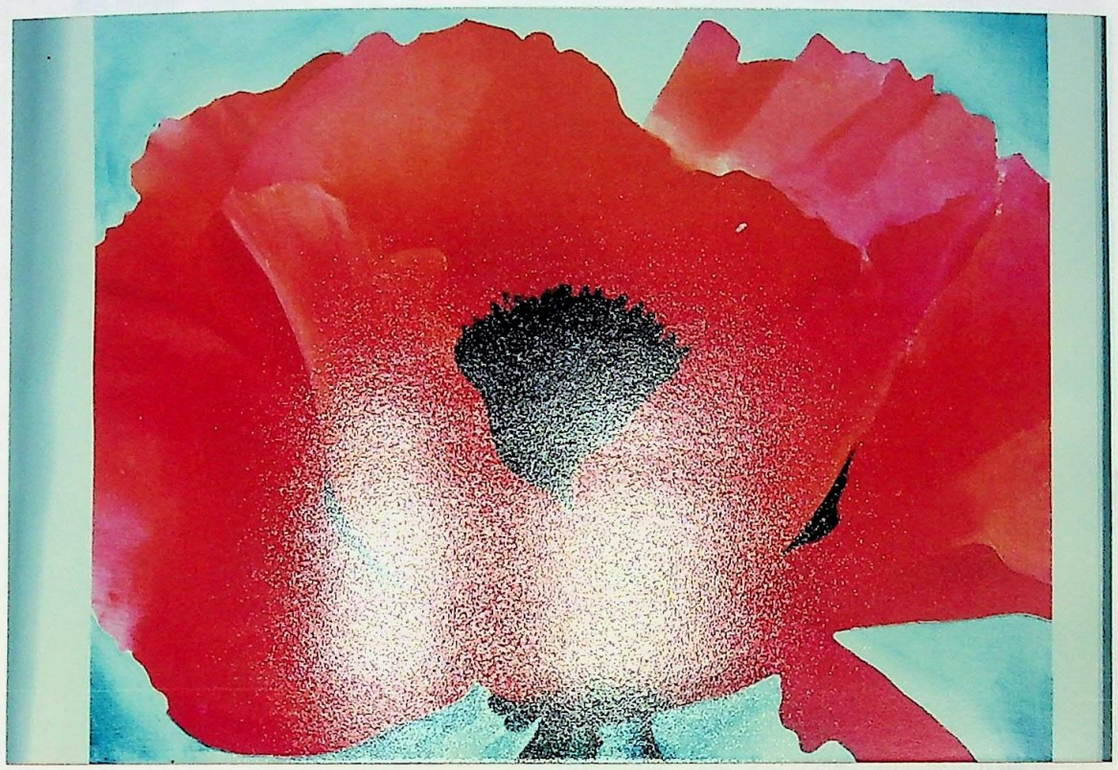
This process of reduction suggests a search for the basic forms of the plant in the elimination of detail, painting by painting. O'Keeffe moves increasingly towards the flower's core, depth becomes reduced and the flower's forms push outwards towards the eye. It slowly loses its identification as a flower to become form and light.

In those paintings that eliminate the edge of the flower a sense of ambiguity is reached. In Red Poppy (1927, Figure 21) the flower stands out clearly against its blue background. Each petal is clear and crisp and the painting is a painting of a red poppy as a red poppy should be. Black Iris (1926, Figure 22), however, again brings the internal forms of the plant forward to fill the canvas and its outer petals are dissolved in light as if out of focus. There is a suggestion of light located within the flower, the flower unfolding outwards towards the viewer from this light. In Abstraction - White Rose (1927, Figure 23) a similar light at the lower edge of the painting radiates outwards through the repetitive forms of the flower to the dark outer edge. The nature of the rose is made indistinct by this light. The edges of the flower extend beyond the canvas and there is a sense of looking down into a light-filled space of indeterminate size. In this dissolution in light the flower becomes a suggestive vessel for the viewer rather than a given object of certain physical identity. In the paintings which push the forms of the flower towards abstraction colour becomes



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less important than the nature of this light and the tonal variations it produces. Black Iris and Abstraction - White Rose are predominantly painted in neutral tones of grey and black. In the paintings where the flower is distinct, colour quality grows more vivid and important to the image, as in Red Poppy and Sunflower for Maggie.

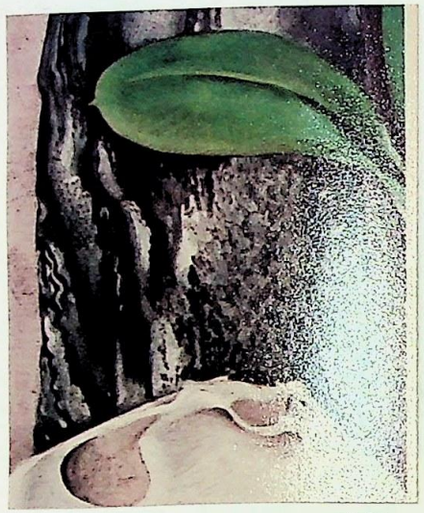
O'Keeffe has described her objectives in painting flowers simply:

> "So I said to myself - I'll paint what I see - what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it."[6]

She has disagreed with associations brought to these paintings:

> "Well - I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower - and I don't."[7]

It seems, however, inevitable that associations with human sexuality should be read from her flower paintings as in forms she reveals in the flower in Black Iris and Jack-in-the-Pulpit VI inevitably echo phallic and vaginal shapes.[8] The ambiguity of the close-up viewpoint pushes the viewer towards this connection and gives a suggestion of the repetition of basic natural forms - the flower containing elements of the human body which in turn is rediscovered in the landscape. Abraham A. Davison has suggested that O'Keeffe's work from the flower implies,



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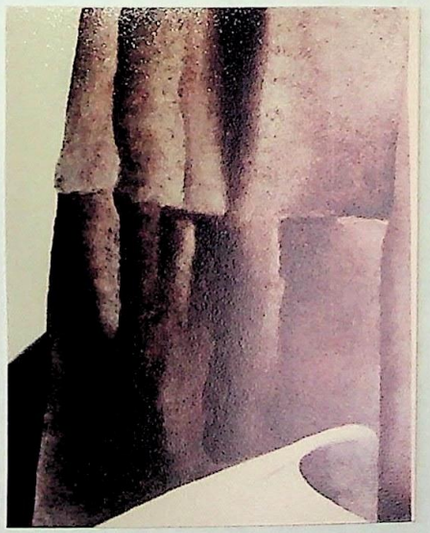

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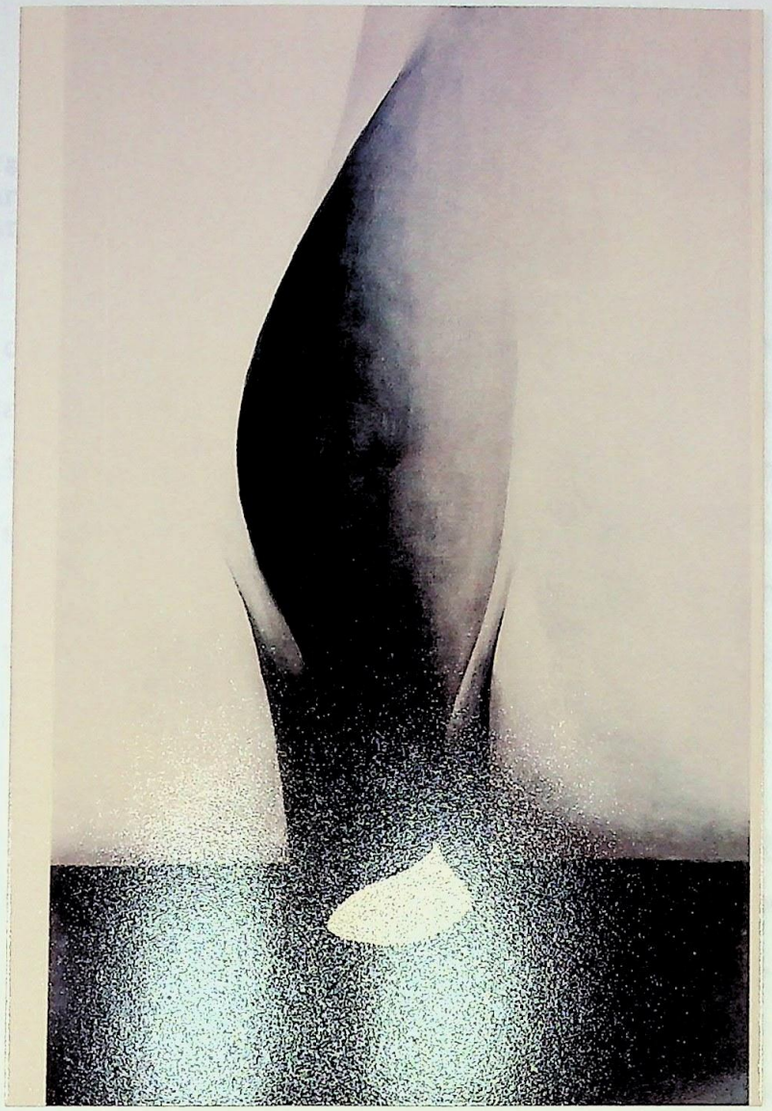

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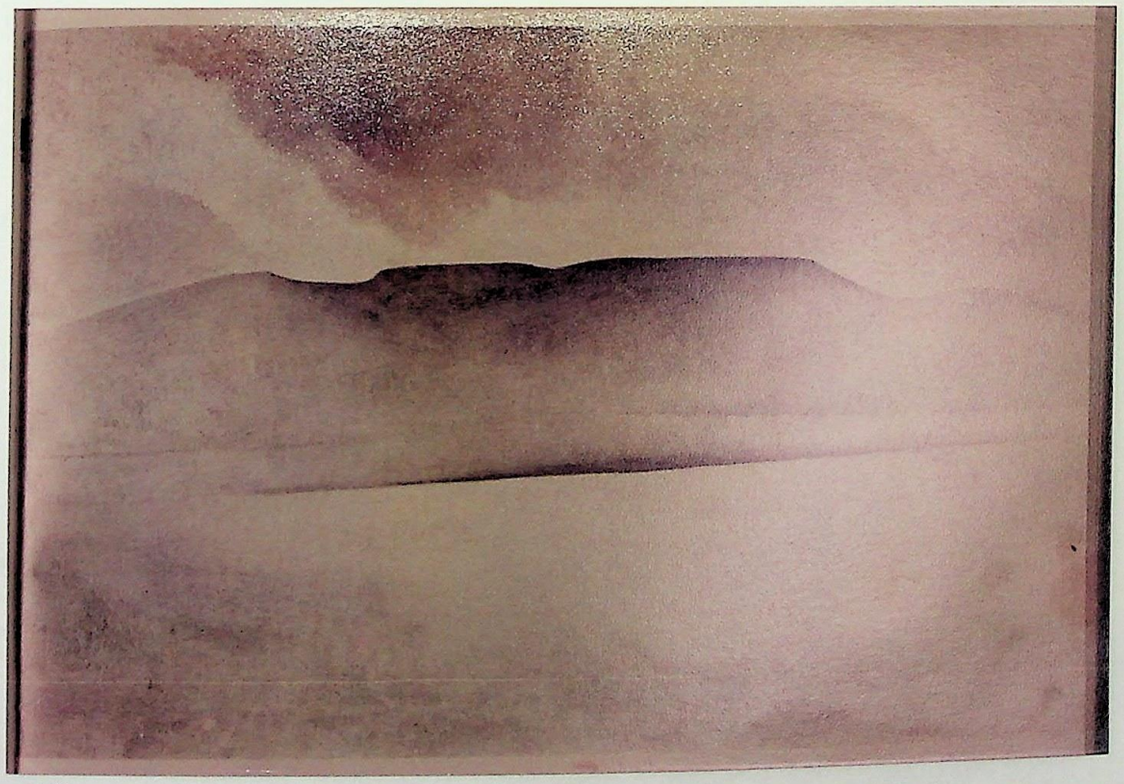

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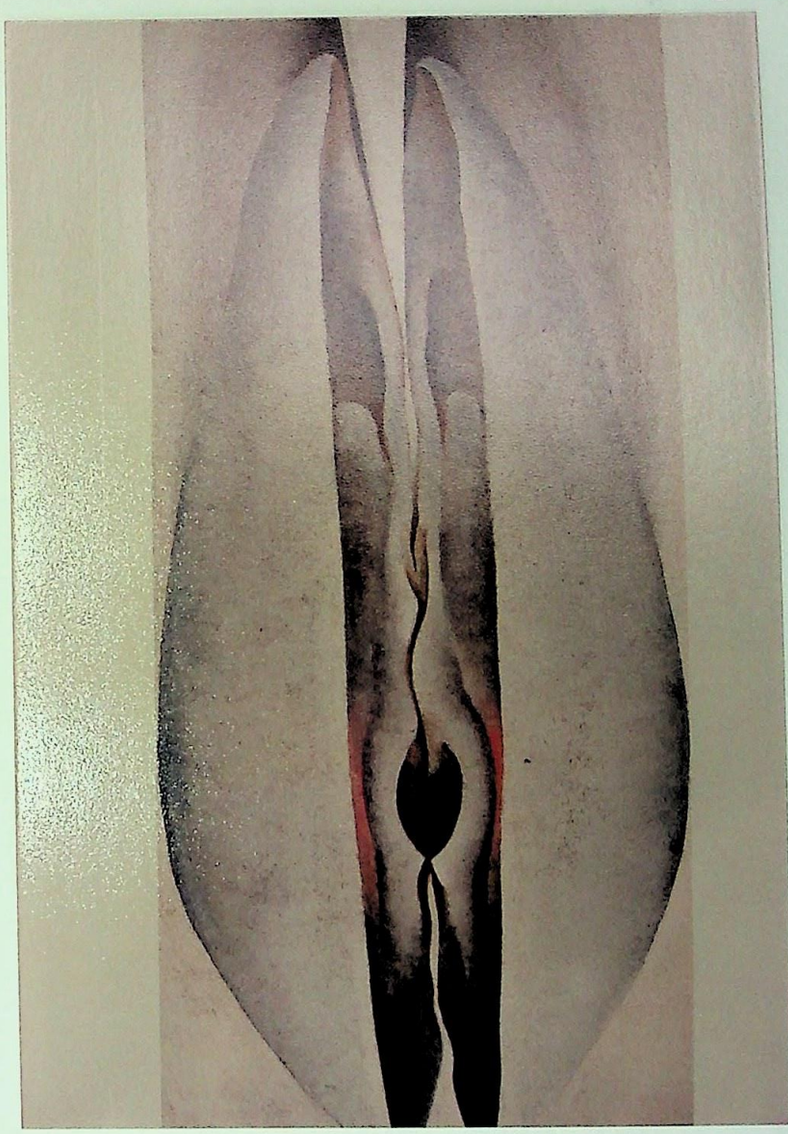
> ..."a sexuality-in-nature, integrated with an expansiveness-in-nature, a swelling, a germinating, a bursting forth."[9]

The connection of forms was found by O'Keeffe herself in the execution of the Shell and Old Shingle series of 1926. This series begins as a still-life arrangement of a shell, shingle and green leaf which compares the surface textures of each object, a small section of each being present.(Figures 24, 25, 26 and 27). The sixth painting of the series is an abstraction of the white shell below the vertical shape of the shingle which is now an airy form merging with the background (Figure 28). Shell and Old Shingle VII is, however, a painting of the mountain across the lake from O'Keeffe's house (Figure 29). She did not notice the resemblance of the mountain to the shingle on her table until long after they were painted and she subsequently joined the painting of the mountain to the series.

The use of an extreme close-up viewpoint has been described by Ellen H. Johnson as follows:

> "By isolating and concentrating on single objects from his daily environment (a flower in the garden, a toaster in his kitchen) the artist creates an image which may be an intensification of his experience - of the mysterious power of simple things, of the wonder with which he regards his world - but which he has brought into an entirely new state of being from the source object."[10]

This reflects O'Keeffe's reference to "the inexplicable thing in nature" which she sought to explore.[11] Her use



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of the close-up viewpoint, as I have said, implies an attempt to look inside the object, to reveal its nature in a way not usually seen. The centrality of her images, as in Black Iris and Jack-in-the-Pulpit VI, gives the sense of being drawn into the object's core. These chosen natural objects have a natural symmetry of their own which is increased by this "head-on" approach.[12] This symmetry is particularly evident in two paintings of shells of 1926, Open Clam Shell (Figure 30) and Closed Clam Shell (Figure 31), which emphasize the almost perfect symmetry of the shells. O'Keeffe's shells and flowers expand forward from their centres and in paintings where the close-up view is extreme enough to eliminate the edges of the object we are placed right at this centre.

O'Keeffe's close-up approach suggests a relation to photography, particularly where she has thrown areas of the flower out of focus (most notably in Black Iris) as in a close-up photograph taken at a wide aperture.[13] The camera has indeed introduced us to new viewpoints on the visual world and the use of untraditional viewpoints such as close-up can bring images towards abstraction in painting in revealing a natural form out of context or isolating an area of landscape. Yet O'Keeffe's treatment of the flowers is not purely formal as she uses light and tonal contrasts to create a sense of mood and drama which has now become more austere and stark in her neutral palate and precisely rendered paint surface.

O'Keeffe's abstract work at this time contains form and colours relating to her paintings of flowers and Abraham A. Davison has pointed to,

> ..."a tenuous line separating the nonobjective paintings from some of O'Keeffe's single flower or plant pictures such as Black Iris and Corn, Dark".[14]

Paintings such as Jack-in-the-Pulpit VI and Shell and Old Shingle VI appear as total abstractions if taken out of context of their series. This suggests that forms used in her abstractions have a starting point in objective reality. They retain a physicality and concern with natural forms and derive from O'Keeffe's empathy with these forms. Her use of colour is based in greys, crimsons, deep greens and blues similar to the colours in her flower paintings - a palate which also evokes a sense of earth.

O'Keeffe repeatedly uses a curving, sinuous form which first appears in Music - Pink and Blue (1919, Figure 32). In this painting a flat area of blue appears behind a sweep of folding, modelled forms in pink and grey which suggest an isolated area of bone and muscle seen in close-up. As with the flower paintings, there is a feeling of being brought to the interior of a physical natural object yet the nature of this object remains unspecified. The painting was actually derived from the idea of painting to music which O'Keeffe had first encountered in Alon Bement's classes,[15] however, the physicality and fleshy qualities of the painting bring it to associations unconnected with this original impetus. There is again an unspecific sexuality in the nature of these forms.

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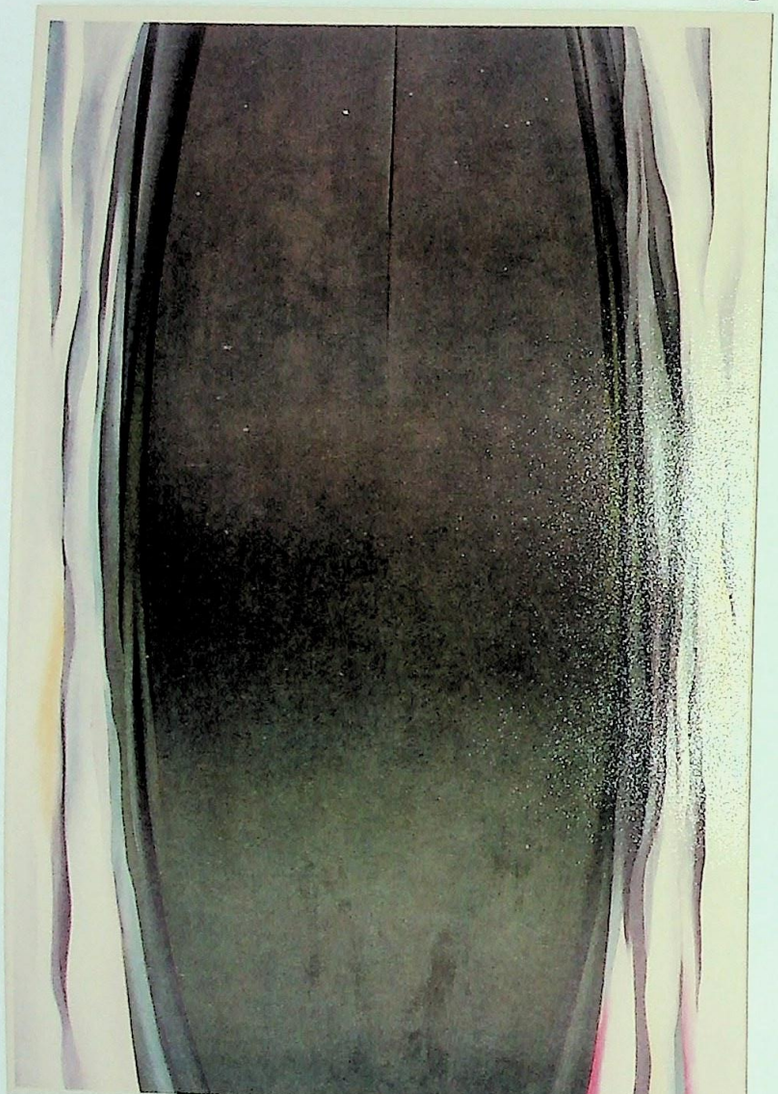

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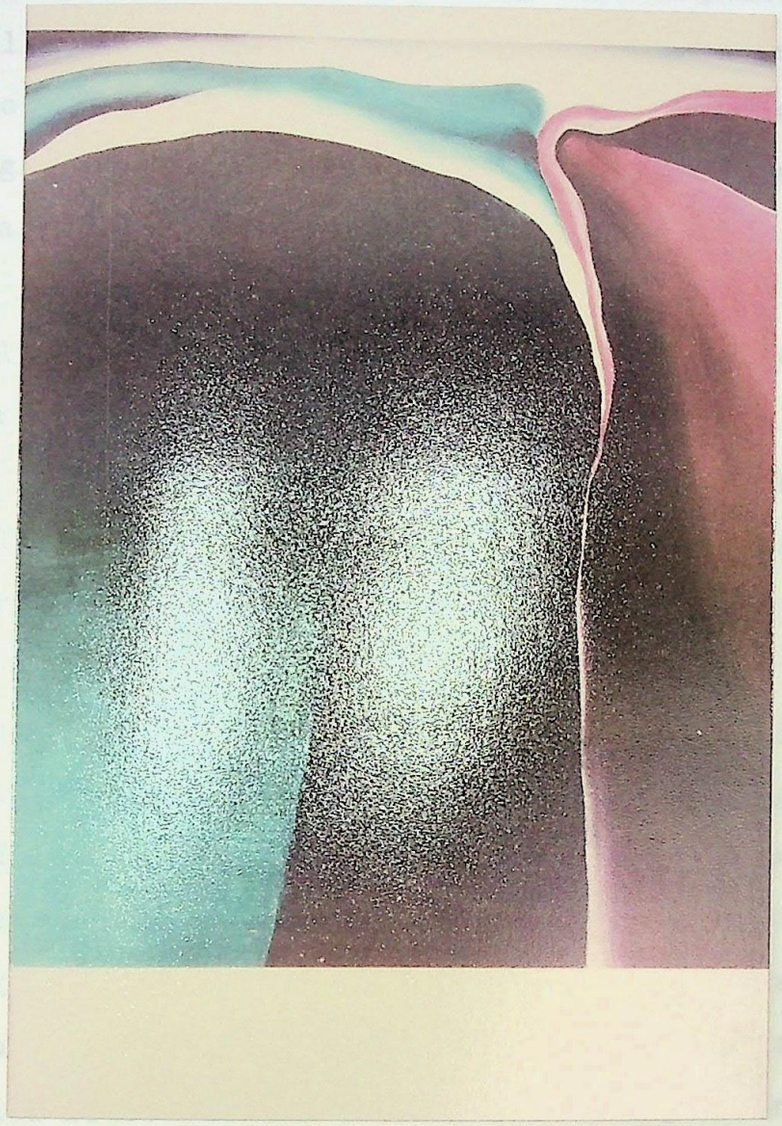

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In Green-Grey Abstraction (1931, Figure 33) these forms reappear against an almost symmetrical central area of flat grey which is divided by a delicate vertical line extending upwards from the lower edge of the painting. The modelled folds surrounding this central oval shape appear to advance towards the eye off the flat plane of grey to give a sense of peering into this dark area. The forms again imply extension beyond the canvas, an area isolated from a greater whole, or a close-up view which gives only slight clues to what it might have come from. These curving forms can be seen as a basic natural element found in the human body, in decaying wood or in the landscape. In producing it in non-objective paintings the ambiguity is increased. In Dark Abstraction (1924, Figure 34) it suggests an area of earth. In this painting, dominated by dark areas of opaque paint, the eye is carried to the upper edge by a thin line of light dividing the dark mass, one side blue-black and the other dark crimson. These areas are folded at the top into modelled forms above which light comes from a space behind giving the suggestion of a sinuous horizon.[16] This use of light coming from an unspecified source behind the forms of the painting also recalls paintings such as Jack-in-the-Pulpit V.

Abstraction in this later work most often appears less as an independent concern than a related form complementing her work from the natural object (although occasionally work such as Black and White appears to

be entirely non-referential). The interrelation of form and handling between her abstractions and work from the object suggests that what is studied through painting from the object forms a basis for non-objective work; and also that the forms which O'Keeffe uses in her abstractions are sought out in natural objects. The abstraction is more general, however, with identification with "a flower" or "a landscape" and the associations the viewer might have with such an object. O'Keeffe described abstraction as:

> ..."the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint".[17]

The forms which appear most consistently in her later work - the rounded shape and curving fold - would seem to express "the intangible thing" as a sense of physicality, of organic connection of forms repeated throughout natural matter, including the human body, and consequently, the correspondence of natural forms and her own self. In her later landscapes O'Keeffe was to find an echo of these forms again in an external context in the hills of New Mexico.

Footnotes

[1]See Georgia O'Keeffe. A friend of O'Keeffe's had shown her drawings to Stieglitz who exhibited them unknown to her. Shen she returned to Teachers College in 1916 she had been informed by a fellow student that "Virginia O'Keeffe" was having a show of drawings at the Stieglitz Gallery. She subsequently argued with Stieglitz, asking him to take them down: "For me the drawings were private and the idea of their being hung on the wall for the public to look at was too much". However, the drawings remained and she had another show in 1917 of drawings and watercolours.

[2]Charlotte Striefer Rubinstein in American Women Artists notes that "Bement, like Dow, was teaching oriental principles of design, stressing the balance of light and dark (notan), and the importance of filling the space beautifully, with sensitivity to the openings between the shapes."(p.182).

[3]"These works are not put into paint until the image is clear in her head. She may jot down some notations no more than an inch high before she begins to work. But to start right in with the brush as she did in those restless watercolours of 1917 and '18 is a procedure she no longer follows". (Eleanor Munro, Originals: American Women Artists, p. 91).

[4]Sam Hunter, American Art of the 20th Century, p. 77.

[5]"An uncompromising rejection of naturalist illision, and its replacement by some visual system of autonomous plastic signs was never realized as a collective effort in America. His (Stieglitz) artists perhaps wanted to conceive of art as a necessary organic and independent structure, but in the end they were all forced to make conciliatory gestures towards tradition." Ibid, p. 75.

[6]O'Keeffe .

[7]Ibid.

[8]Barbara Rose, however, points out that: "Stieglitz and the artists closest to him, O'Keeffe, Marin and Dove, intended their work to convey a specifically sexual charge, although this aim was not part of a formalized program. They believed that the creative life was tied to the senses." (American Art since 1900: A Critical History, p.50).

[9]Abraham A. Davison, Early American Modernist Painting 1910-1935, p.68.

[10]Ellen H. Johnson, Modern Art and the Object, p. 125.

[11]see Chapter 1, p. 10

[12]The flowers O'Keeffe painted were not random selections but carefully chosen. She describes searching in New York flower shops for the black iris, (see O'Keeffe).

[13]Eleanor Munron has suggested the influence of the use of close-up viewpoints in the photography of Imogen Cunningham and Paul Strand (see Munro, p. 87).

[14]Davison, p.67.

[15]see O'Keeffe.

[16]Abraham A. Davison finds in Dark Abstraction, ..."a suggestion of the sloping contours of fields topped off by a sliver of sky; or it is an though a cross section of earth had been sliced off, set end on end, and crowned with a part of the sky. At the same time the crevice atop one of these so-called sections of earth can be regarded as a pore in the skin, and the line winding its way to the bottom of the painting not just as a crevice within the earth but also as a hair or nerve ganglion." (p.65).

[17]O'Keeffe.

CHAPTER IV:

The New Mexico Landscape

O'Keeffe had painted intermittently from landscape up to 1929 but following her rediscovery of New Mexico in that year (she had first visited that area in 1917) landscape became the foremost subject of her painting. She spent summers in New Mexico in the 1930s until in 1940 she bought a house near Abiquiu. Settling there was to provide her with the opportunity to work consistently from the New Mexico landscape where the features of the land presented her with very different qualities to the open spaces of Texas. It is a place of dry eroded cliffs and hillsides, rocks and earth of rich colours and dry textures.

In her paintings from this landscape she did not explore new technical means but consolidated the style in oil paint she had developed since 1918. The dry surface of her paint matches the texture of the harsh landscape, emphasizing the rough solidity of the folded humps of hills and scarred cliffs. The colours she found in these remain close to her palate in paintings such as Black Iris or Dark Abstraction, concentrating on umbers, crimson, black, greys and white. Her precision and balance in composition also remains evident and she continued to take a reductive approach to the image, producing the most basic elements of the forms of the land.[1] The dry physicality of the land led her away from the use of light, the white light found at the centre of her flowers or radiating through her watercolours. In its place she concentrates on the physical nature of the earth. The earth is treated as an object and its features

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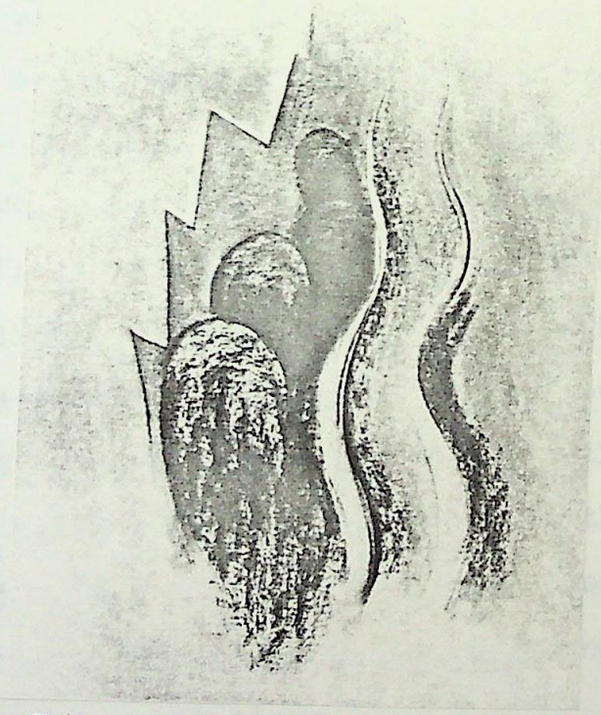

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frequently relate to forms already present in O'Keeffe's work - the modelled sinuous forms of Green-Grey Abstraction or Music - Pink and Blue - as if she emphasizes another connection in the chain of related natural forms.

An earlier oil painting of 1916, Painting No. 21 (Palo Duro Canyon) (Figure 35), suggests a basis for her work of this time in its concern with solid forms of earth yet shows the distinct difference between these periods in her work in the application of paint and use of colour. In Painting No. 21 O'Keeffe has abstracted the forms of a deep canyon into sweeping, rounded shapes. The dominant form, a bulging mass of the canyon's wall is echoed by a progression of rounded shapes through the canyon floor. These forms are emphasized by thick, roughly brushed black lines which separate and contain each shape. The warm, glowing yellows, oranges and reds of the earth are repeated in the clouds above which are pulled into unity with the canyon walls and the predominance of these hot colours is offset by a small triangular patch of blue sky. There is a slight sense of recession through the canyon floor but the walls and sky push forward towards the viewer. The feeling of compaction of forms within the space of the painting, of heavy earth contained within this rectangle, looks forward to her painting in New Mexico but Painting No. 21 retains a fluidity of paint and sense of gesture absent in the later paintings.

O'Keeffe later described the experience which motivated this painting:

> "Those perilous climbs were frightening but it was wonderful to me and not like anything I had known before. The fright of the day was still with me in the night and I would often dream that the foot of my bed rose straight up into the air - then just as I was about to fall I would wake up".[2]

The heightened colour of Painting No. 21 reflects these emotions and the drama of the place. The hot colours and swelling forms suggest O'Keeffe's own feelings about the place rather than the canyon's physical reality. The forms in this painting relate to Drawing No. 13 which contains soft swelling shapes drawn in charcoal (Figure 36). These forms have a symbolic suggestion of growth or ripening. In New Mexico, however O'Keeffe was working in the landscape[3] and her starting point for these paintings seems more direct and objective; an attraction to particular places in the landscape and feeling of empathy with the forms they offered her. In recalling the origins of Red Hills and Sky (1945, Figure 37) she says:

> "A little way out beyond my kitchen window at the Ranch is a V shape in the red hills. I passed the V many times - sometimes stopping to look as it spoke to me quietly. I one day carried my canvas out and made a drawing of it. The shapes of the drawing were so simple that it scarely seemed worth while to bother with it any further. But I did a painting - just the arms of two red hills reaching out to the sky and holding it."[4]

O'Keeffe's painting in New Mexico shows a diversity which arises partly from the varied nature of the places she choose to paint and partly from her use of different

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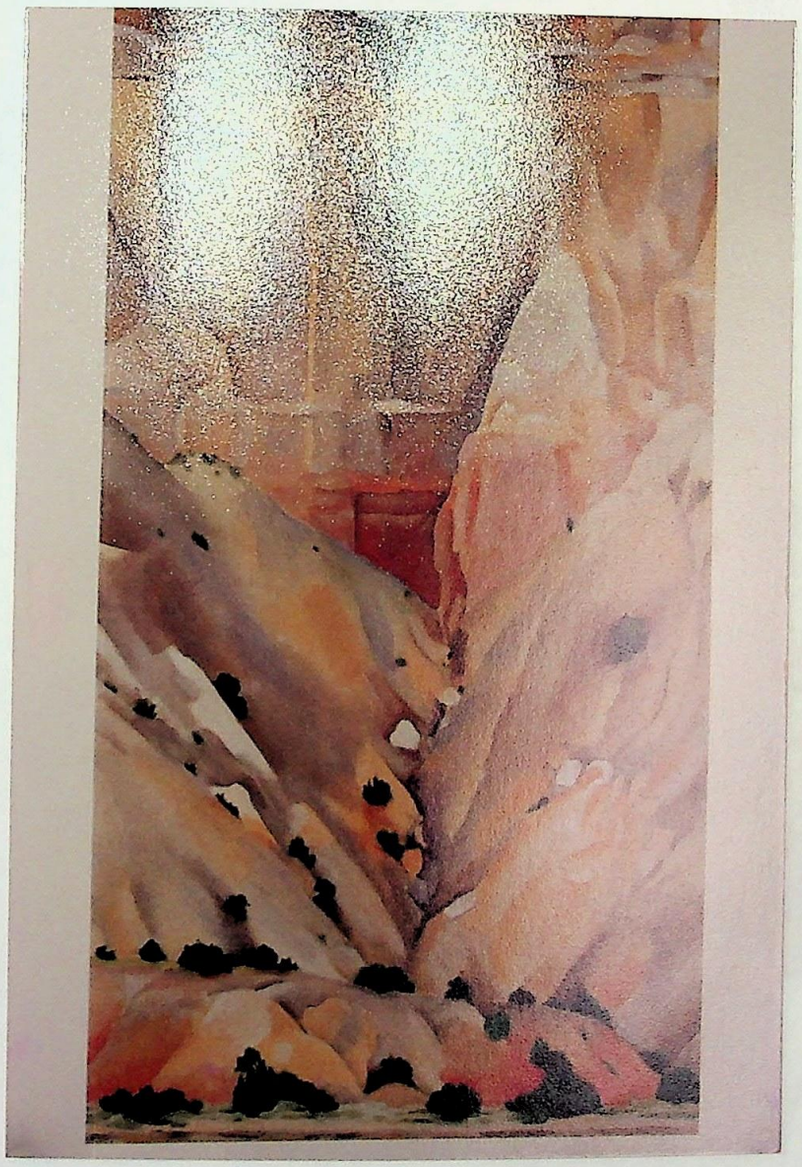

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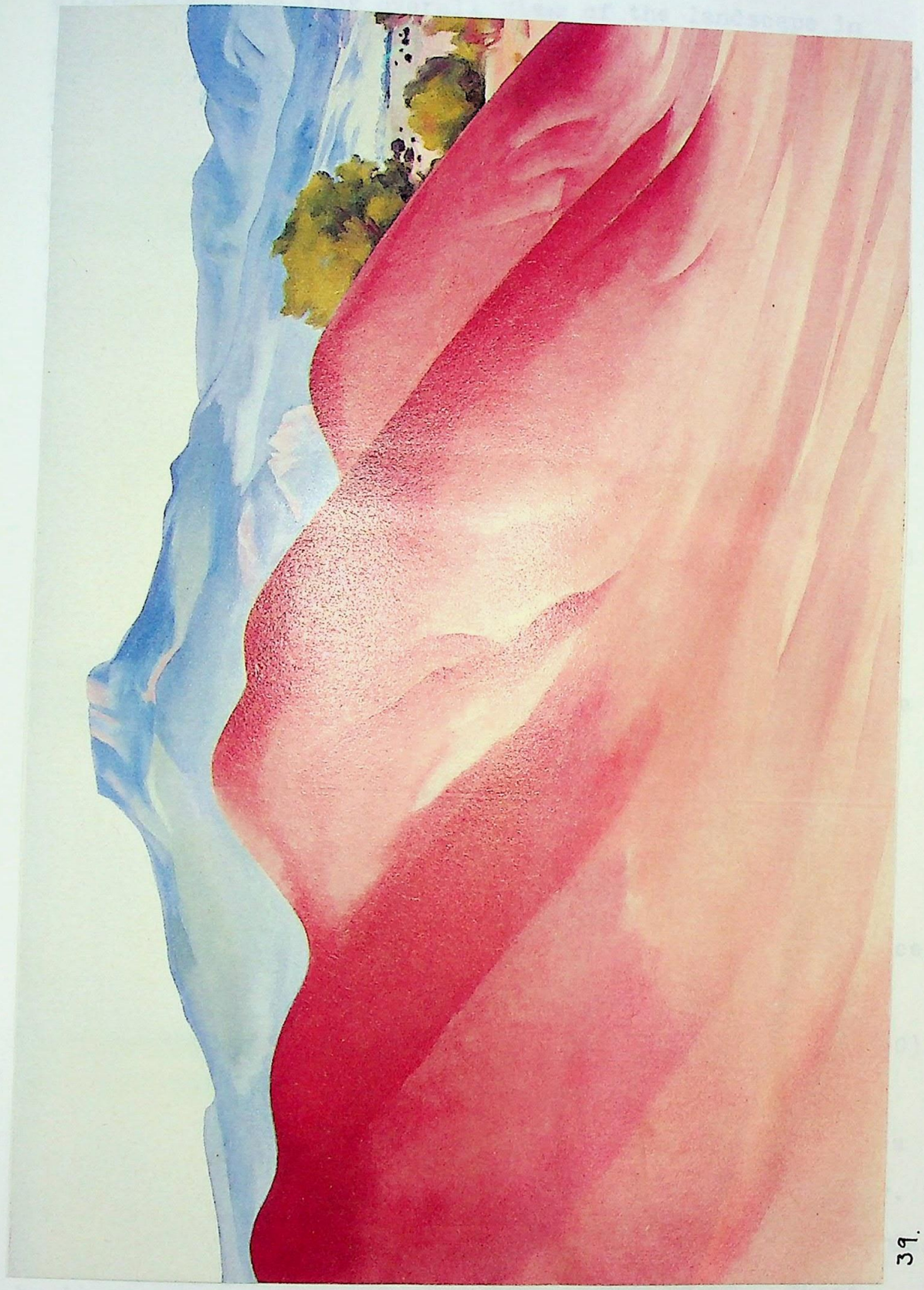

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viewpoints. She took overall views of the landscape in paintings such as Pedernal and Red Hills (1936, Figure 39). This painting shows a recession from the red hills in the foreground to the distant blue Pedernal in a landscape which respects the perspective of the view and includes details of trees and bushes. Red Hills and Sky is dominated by the flat blue of the sky contained by the reduced forms of the hills forming a V shape along the lower edge of the canvas. Cliffs beyond Abiquiu - Dry Waterfall (1943, Figure 38) concentrates on a selected area of cliff, showing only a small patch of blue sky at the upper edge. It focuses on the heavy forms of rocks and the feeling of the mass and weight of the cliff face and as in O'Keeffe's flower paintings, a sense of abstraction derives from the use of a concentrated viewpoint. Yet here details of bushes and trees give scale and clarity to what we are looking at and there is no ambiguity in the image.

The New Mexico landscapes frequently work together as series since O'Keeffe returned continually to the same places to paint taking different aspects of the place's features or a different approach. The Grey Hills (1942, Figure 40) is worked from an area she visited frequently. She has selected a view of the hillside which places a rounded area at the base of the hill centrally and almost symmetrically. The eye is led up the hillside, which recedes sharply upwards, by lines and fissures scarring these lower rocks. These

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rocks are pushed outwards by the contrast of their lighter-toned bands of grey, crimson and ochre with the warm black of the upper part of the hill. O'Keeffe appears to have rounded off and reduced the forms of the hill into soft folds. The view up the recession of the hill to the blue sky above it gives a feeling of being below its heavy mass which pushes down and out.

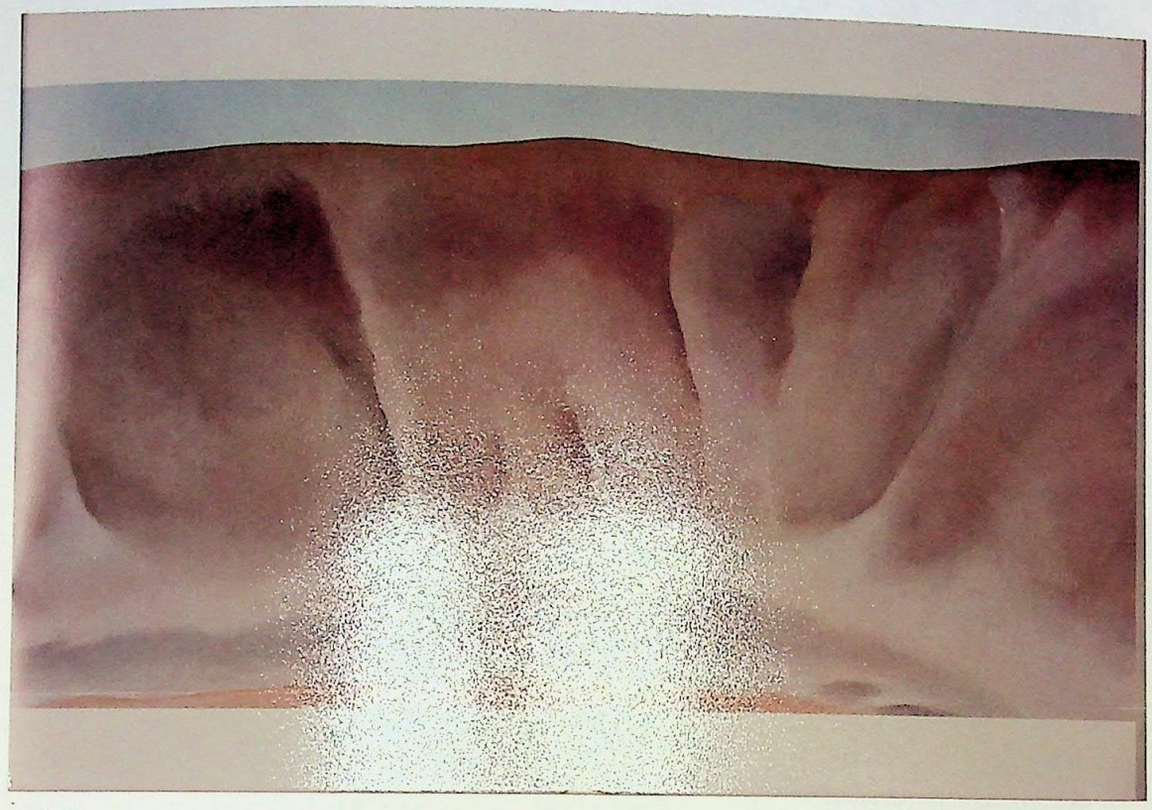
In Black Place I (1944) she concentrates on a section of the folded humps of rock in a similar hillside, eliminating the sky and compressing the shapes into the area of the canvas. Her composition is again centrally based and divided into two areas by the line of a gully running down between the folds of rock. The crimson and grey of these rocks recall the base of The Grey Hills, yet in the absence of the contrasting bright blue of the sky the neutral effect of these colours concentrates the attention on the form of the folds of earth and their rough surfaces. A slight sense of the hill's slope is given by the diminishment of the repetitive forms as they progress upwards. In Black Place III of the same year the elements of this image are abstracted as the central line becomes jagged against a flat area of black (Figure 41). The forms of the hill are flattened into areas of grey to each side of this. Tonal contrast has been increased by pushing the upper area of the painting towards white to produce a sharp contrast with the central black area. This white reduces the recession of the hillside by advancing forward.

These three paintings show a similar process of concentration through a series from the same object as the Jack-in-the-Pulpit series. O'Keeffe focuses closer on the basic forms of the hills until reaching abstraction. In Black Place III abstraction derives from a distortion of forms rather than the reduction of Jack-in-the-Pulpit VI to the basic central element of the flower. This distortion of the curving forms of the hillside to jagged blocks and the introduction of dramatic tonal contrast brings a drama, almost a feeling of threat and violence to the depiction of the place which she described as:

> "Such a beautiful, untouched lonely-feeling place - part of what I call the Far Away."[5]

This creation of mood is reminiscent of Painting No. 21 in its heightened drama, but abstraction here appears drawn out of the actual features of the place rather than applied or projected onto it.

In several of these landscapes a clear relation exists between forms in O'Keeffe's abstractions and these appear as if projected by the artist onto the actual elements of the land. The forms in Cliffs beyond Abiquiu (1943) and Red and Yellow Cliffs (1940) recall Music - Pink and Blue as the sweeping heavy forms of the cliffs are brought out as folds resembling muscle tissue or sinews. The yellows and pinks in which she paints them soften the rock forms to resemble flesh. Yet trees placed in the foreground root these images in their context of landscape.



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Grey Hills II is based on the horizontal block of a cliff painted in grey and umber tones below a thin band of pale blue sky (1936, Figure 42). This painting concentrates on the horizontality of the cliff which is increased by the long rectangular format of the canvas (16" x 30"). This horizontality is offset by diagonal ridges down the cliff face. The absence of detail and the reduction of form in this painting obcures any sense of scale giving Grey Hills II an ambiguity of content. The contours down the cliff face protrude like bones and the image could suggest the flank of an animal or a horizontal tree trunk.

While such evidence of O'Keeffe's earlier work remains in Grey Hills II or Cliffs beyond Abiquiu the dominant impression given by these landscapes is the nature of the place itself. The varied aspects of this work would seem to suggest that O'Keeffe responded to the diversity and richness of what she saw in this land, using its own qualities - the weight and solidity of the Grey Hills and cracked cliff faces. The paintings appear more specifically bound to the place, to New Mexico, than the more universal experience of light which her watercolour landscapes depict.

It seems inevitable that O'Keeffe should have finally chosen to live in a place where she would be surrounded by the elements of her work in her physical environment.

Her house at Abiquiu itself appeared to be an extension of the hills and earth around it. O'Keeffe's withdrawal from urban life was shared by the other painters associated with 291: Marin remained in Maine and New Jersey and Dove on his boat in New England. Historically the 291 artists belong to the second decade of the century and the 1920s, remaining apart from subsequent developments in American art and, like O'Keeffe, continuing to work in a style already developed at that time. However, they remain as forerunners to subsequent movements in American modernism.[6]

Barbara Rose has claimed that:

> "Like Thoreau, those closest to Stieglitz - Marin, Hartley, Dove and O'Keeffe - all eventually sought refuge in nature from the superficial materialism of the city."[7]

There is indeed a sense in O'Keeffe's work of a withdrawal to a world of natural beauty and order, as if the creative independence she set herself to achieve in 1915 was finally possible only through contact with the land and nature. But it is also clear that O'Keeffe had a very real empathy with this land and her love of its harsh beauty is evident in her paintings. It was in West Texas that her work had first developed and perhaps in returning to the Southwest she sought a fresh connection with the original impetus of her work.

Footnotes

[1]O'Keeffe has stated that: "Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is lines and colors put together so that they say something. For me that is the very basis of painting." (Georgia O'Keeffe).

[2]Ibid.

[3]O'Keeffe has described her days working in the landscape, often in extremes of heat and cold, in Georgia O'Keeffe.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Sam Hunter claims: "Despite their essential modesty of scale and ambition, and without being an actual influence, the paintings of O'Keeffe and Dove prefigure attitudes and an imagery that belong to contemporary abstraction; they are part of an intelligible continuity of taste and change between two otherwise antithetical generations." (American Art of the 20th Century, p.106).

[7]Barbara Rose, American Art since 1900: A Critical History, p. 40.

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