

# WHITNEY

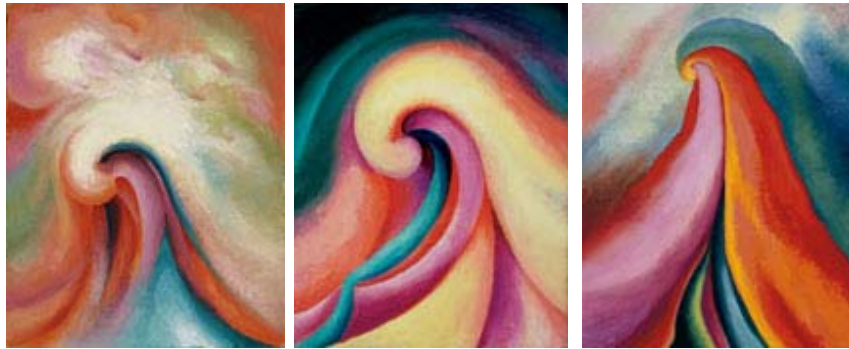
Whitney Museum of American Art  
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street  
New York, NY 10021  
whitney.org/press

Tel. (212) 570-3633  
Fax (212) 570-4169  
pressoffice@whitney.org

## Press Release

Contact:  
Whitney Museum of American Art  
Stephen Soba, Leily Soleimani  
212-570-3633

### **THE WHITNEY TO PRESENT *GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: ABSTRACTION* September 17, 2009–January 17, 2010**



NEW YORK, May 8, 2009 -- The artistic achievement of Georgia O'Keeffe is examined from a fresh perspective in *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction*, a landmark exhibition debuting this fall at the Whitney Museum of American Art. While O'Keeffe (1887–1986) has long been recognized as one of the central figures in 20th-century art, the radical abstract work she created throughout her long career has remained less well-known than her representational art. By surveying her abstractions, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction* repositions O'Keeffe as one of America's first and most daring abstract artists. The exhibition goes on view in the Whitney's third-floor Peter Norton Family Galleries from September 17, 2009 through January 17, 2010.

Including more than 130 paintings, drawings, watercolors, and sculptures by O'Keeffe as well as selected examples of Alfred Stieglitz's famous photographic portrait series of O'Keeffe, the exhibition has been many years in the making. The curatorial team, led by Whitney curator Barbara Haskell, includes Barbara Buhler Lynes, the curator of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and the Emily Fisher Landau Director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center; Bruce Robertson, professor of the history of art and architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Elizabeth Hutton Turner, professor and vice provost

for the arts at the University of Virginia and guest curator at The Phillips Collection; and Sasha Nicholas, Whitney curatorial assistant. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by the organizers, selections from the recently unsealed Stieglitz-O'Keeffe correspondence, and a contextual chronology of O'Keeffe's life and work. Following its Whitney debut, the show travels to The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C., February 6-May 9, 2010, and to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, May 28-September 12, 2010.

While it is true that O'Keeffe has entered the public imagination as a painter of sensual, feminine subjects, she is nevertheless viewed first and foremost as a painter of places and things. When one thinks of her work it is usually of her magnified images of open flowers and her iconic depictions of animal bones, her Lake George landscapes, her images of stark New Mexican cliffs, and her still lifes of fruit, leaves, shells, rocks, and bones. Even O'Keeffe's canvasses of architecture, from the skyscrapers of Manhattan to the adobe structures of Abiquiu, come to mind more readily than the numerous works—made throughout her career—that she termed abstract.

This exhibition is the first to examine O'Keeffe's achievement as an abstract artist. In 1915, O'Keeffe leaped into the forefront of American modernism with a group of abstract charcoal drawings that were among the most radical creations produced in the United States at that time. A year later, she added color to her repertoire; by 1918, she was expressing the union of abstract form and color in paint. First exhibited in 1923, O'Keeffe's psychologically charged, brilliantly colored abstract oils garnered immediate critical and public acclaim. For the next decade, abstraction would dominate her attention. Even after 1930, when O'Keeffe's focus turned increasingly to representational subjects, she never abandoned abstraction, which remained the guiding principle of her art. She returned to abstraction in the mid-1940s with a new, planar vocabulary that provided a precedent for a younger generation of abstractionists.

Abstraction and representation for O'Keeffe were neither binary nor oppositional. She moved freely from one to the other, cognizant that all art is rooted in an underlying abstract formal invention. For O'Keeffe, abstraction offered a way to communicate ineffable thoughts and sensations. As she said in 1976, "The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint." Through her personal language of abstraction, she sought to give visual form (as she confided in a 1916 letter to

Alfred Stieglitz) to “things I feel and want to say - [but] havent [sic] words for.” Abstraction allowed her to express intangible experience—be it a quality of light, color, sound, or response to a person or place. As O’Keeffe defined it in 1923, her goal as a painter was to “make the unknown—known. By unknown I mean the thing that means so much to the person that he wants to put it down—clarify something he feels but does not clearly understand.”

This exhibition and catalogue chronicle the trajectory of O’Keeffe’s career as an abstract artist and examine the forces impacting the changes in her subject matter and style. From the beginning of her career, she was, as critic Henry McBride remarked, “a newspaper personality.” Interpretations of her art were shaped almost exclusively by Alfred Stieglitz, artist, charismatic impresario, dealer, editor, and O’Keeffe’s eventual husband, who presented her work from 1916 to 1946 at the groundbreaking galleries “291”, the Anderson Galleries, the Intimate Gallery, and An American Place. Stieglitz’s public and private statements about O’Keeffe’s early abstractions and the photographs he took of her, partially clothed or nude, led critics to interpret her work—to her great dismay—as Freudian-tinged, psychological expressions of her sexuality.

Cognizant of the public’s lack of sympathy for abstraction and seeking to direct the critics away from sexualized readings of her work, O’Keeffe self-consciously began to introduce more recognizable images into her repertoire in the mid-1920s. As she wrote to the writer Sherwood Anderson in 1924, “I suppose the reason I got down to an effort to be objective is that I didn’t like the interpretations of my other things [abstractions].” O’Keeffe’s increasing shift to representational subjects, coupled with Stieglitz’s penchant for favoring the exhibition of new, previously unseen work, meant that O’Keeffe’s abstractions rarely figured in the exhibitions Stieglitz mounted of her work after 1930, with the result that her first forays into abstraction virtually disappeared from public view.

### **Catalogue**

In addition to rethinking O’Keeffe’s place in American modernism, the book that accompanies this exhibition reappraises the origin and singular character of her abstract vocabulary and the stylistic shifts which her art underwent over the span of her long career. It adds significant new insight into her art and life, publishing for the first time excerpts of recently unsealed letters written by O’Keeffe to photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz, whom she married in 1924. These letters, along with a contextual chronology and other

primary documents referenced by the authors, offer an intimate glimpse into her creative method and intentions as an artist.

*Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction* was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC; and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM.

The national presentation of the exhibition is proudly supported by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Opening events for the Whitney's presentation are sponsored by **pamella roland**

Significant support for the Whitney's presentation is provided by the Daniel and Pamella DeVos Foundation, The Shen Family Foundation, Jody and John Arnhold, the Karen and Kevin Kennedy Foundation, and Barney A. Ebsworth.

Additional support is provided by The Cowles Charitable Trust, Judy and Stanley Katz, Michelle and Lawrence Lasser, The Karen and Paul Levy Family Foundation, Harvey-Ann and Harvey M. Ross, The Donald and Barbara Zucker Family Foundation, The Eugene McDermott Foundation, Johanna and Leslie Garfield, Marcia and Jan Vilcek, and several anonymous donors.

Media partner Thirteen/WNET

### About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today. First housed on West 8th Street, the Whitney relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and in 1966 inaugurated its present home at 945 Madison Avenue, designed by Marcel Breuer. The Whitney is currently moving ahead with plans to build a second facility, designed by Renzo Piano, located in downtown New York at the entrance to the High Line in the Meatpacking District.

**Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art:**

Oldenburg/van Bruggen	Through September 6, 2009
Sadie Benning: Play Pause	Through September 20, 2009
Photoconceptualism, 1966-1973	Through September 20, 2009
Dan Graham: Beyond	June 25, 2009 – October 11, 2009
Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction	September 17, 2009-January 17, 2010
Roni Horn aka Roni Horn	November 6, 2009-January 24, 2010
Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer	November 6, 2009-January 24, 2010

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. Admission is \$15 for adults; Members, children (ages 11 and under), and New York City public high school students free. Senior citizens (62 and over) and students with valid ID: \$10. There is a \$6 admission fee for a pass to the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery only. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6-9 pm. For information, please call 212-570-3600 or visit [whitney.org](http://whitney.org).

Image Credits, from left to right:

Georgia O'Keeffe, *Series I—No. 1*, 1918  
Oil on composition board, 19 3/4 x 16 in. (50.2 x 40.6 cm)  
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas  
Purchase with assistance from the Anne Burnett Tandy Accessions Fund, 1995.8  
© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Georgia O'Keeffe, *Series I—No. 3*, 1918  
Oil on board, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)  
Milwaukee Art Museum  
Gift of Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation  
M1997.192, © Milwaukee Art Museum  
Photography by Larry Sanders

Georgia O'Keeffe, *Series I, No. 4*, 1918  
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm),  
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich  
Gift of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation  
© Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus