

Georgia O'Keeffe and the Spirit of Ghost Ranch

Eastrose Fellowship UU

June 30, 2024

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

On June 16th, I drove Northwest from the scorching heat of Albuquerque towards Abiquiu, a small settlement with Anasazi and Hopi roots. At nearly 7000 feet on a quiet byway, I reached the entrance of Ghost Ranch with the iconic cow skull image over its gate. I felt a growing sense of anticipation and serenity.

The spaciousness of the desert and mountains dwarfed the ranch's main building. Jimsonweed and sage swayed amongst scrubby pines and cottonwoods with a stunning backdrop of Chimney Rock and sandstone cliffs, etched in a startling blue sky.

I imagined Georgia O'Keeffe standing at my side and wondered if the land felt her absence. Or perhaps even still her spirit. After a week there, I grasped the pull of the landscape and sacred energy of the ranch on her and how it inspired some of her most renowned and treasured works.

When O'Keeffe first arrived in Northern NM in 1929, she was booked as a guest for one week at the Taos home of NY socialite Mabel Dodge Luhan who offered rooms for woman artists. O'Keeffe stayed all summer...no one could argue her out of it or evict her from the guest room. She was mesmerized by the landscape, the air, the solitude and quiet of the place, especially after her interval in NYC as the wife of famed photographer Alfred Steiglitz (the first to show her work, by the way, at his Manhattan Gallery)

In August 1934, she moved to Ghost Ranch, and then in 1940, she moved into a house on the ranch property. Later, she built a hacienda with a studio in Abiquiu, but continued to visit the Ranch often.

In New Mexico, O'Keeffe collected rocks and bones from the desert floor and made them and the distinctive architectural and landscape forms of the area subjects in her work. Known as a loner, she often explored the land she loved in her Model A Ford which she purchased and learned to drive in 1929, or on the back of a motorcycle driven by a local guide. New

Mexico represented salvation – not in a Christian sense. Georgia’s salvation was earthy, even pagan.

A Midwesterner by birth, Georgia often talked about her fondness for Ghost Ranch and Northern New Mexico, as in 1943, when she explained “Such a beautiful, untouched lonely feeling place, such a fine part of what I call the 'Faraway'. It is a place I have painted before ... even now I must do it again.” And she did.

Without exaggeration, there are 100s of commentaries and appreciations of O’Keeffe online. She was the Mother of American Modernism. Naturally, there are many extolling her artistic prowess and the unique beauty and power of her paintings. She is, by far, one of the most popular American painters in history. We even have one of her paintings on a poster in our bathroom!

Yet, there are other more provocative portals to understanding O’Keeffe, each of which offers us valuable questions to ponder about ourselves and our own lives.

The first of these portals is Feminism. O’Keeffe was quietly fierce and independent. She went her own way. She definitely forged a path of woman artists during a time when the art world was dominated and controlled by men. She had a rebel spirit and never wavered or joined the consensus of the changing ideals of her peers.

O’Keeffe liked to paint the same subjects over and over, especially flowers, nearby hills, and doors. “I’m always trying to paint that door,” she lamented, “I never quite get it. It’s a curse, it fascinates me.” The metaphor here is clear: How do you make the most of what’s on the other side of the door, of what’s inside you, your talents and desires?

Was she fearless? No. But she harnessed her fear to live an authentic life. She said, “I’ve been terrified every moment of my life and I’ve never let it keep me from a single thing I wanted to do.” She continues with “I know now that most people are so closely concerned with themselves that they are not aware of their own individuality.” “I can see myself,” she tells us, “And it has helped me say what I want to say – in paint.”

So, Georgia’s first questions for you to ponder is: “Do you allow fear to hold you back? How do you express **your** individuality?”

The second portal is Intuition and Spirituality. For many years, artists were taught that spirituality, intuition and emotional subject matter lacked seriousness in art practice. Yet, this very kind of spirituality birthed many of painting groups of American modernism in the 20th century.

Artist such as O’Keeffe were directly nourished by Transcendentalism (a philosophy with Unitarian roots) and Eastern mysticism. In particular, they were inspired by the “Nature” essays our own Ralph Waldo Emerson. The artists felt it more important to respond to painting through intuition and personal connection than through explanation.

As Emerson himself explained: “Regard Nature as a phenomenon, not a substance, into who’s secrets a dream may lead us deeper than a hundred concerted experiments.”

O’Keeffe was surely influenced by these words from Emerson: “When one’s reasoned imagination and affection are stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moment of life are these delicious awakening of the higher powers.” She wrote:” I have no idea what should be written but a woman who has lived many things and who sees lines and color as an expression of living.”

Georgia’s second question to ponder asks: Have you tapped into your own intuition? Do you trust it? Has reason crowded it out?

The third portal is Sensuality. Quite commonly, O’Keeffe’s flower paintings are said to resemble the most intimate female body parts. Georgia denied this. In fact, she found it amusing. But these works awaken sensuality in the viewer. That’s not up to her, really.

In truth, her personal style was more austere than sensual. She typically covered up with the black garments she designed and sometimes sewed herself. She actually perceived herself as more masculine than feminine, and yet one cannot deny the sensuality that pervades some of her most familiar images.

Georgia’s third question for you to ponder is: Are you at home in your body, in your sensual self?

Our next portal to explore is **Economy and Simplicity.** Gaze at any of O’Keeffe’s works from her New Mexico sojourn and you’ll notice how uncluttered the canvas is. O’Keeffe didn’t embellish. Didn’t crowd or add

anything that was not actually there. “Nothing is less real than realism,” she quipped. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.”

There is the same spaciousness to her painting style as there is to the subject matter. Her paintings are a commentary on seeing. She said: “I found that could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say in any other way.”

Georgia’s fourth question to ponder asks: “Is your life spacious or cluttered? How would you like it to be and how can you move in that direction?”

Our final portal is Sacred Silence. A memory I will take away from my week at Ghost Ranch is how quiet it is, even with multiple programs happening on campus. A sacred silence pervades the space, punctuated by laughter or soft conversations, or the sound of hiking boots shuffling through the dusty red clay pathways.

Thomas Merton, the renowned Christian mystic monk spent time nearby at the Christ in the Desert monastery and wrote about it in his books. He tells us: One has to be alone, under the sky, before everything falls into place, and one finds one’s own place in the midst of it all.”

The Jesuit professor Christopher Pramuk recalled his own pilgrimage to the area in his piece on *Sacred Silence*. He writes: “What I remember most about that long hike with my friend is the palpable, pregnant silence of the place. Bathed in the blue-bright exposure of the New Mexico sun, I felt able to breathe again, just to be, without explanation.”

“From head to toe, I felt embraced by the stark beauty of things, things heard and seen with sudden clarity under the broad desert sky. I was alive; the dry breeze kissed my face, and that was gift enough for the moment.”

Pramuk lifts up something true for us, here in Portland, when he argues: “Especially for us who dwell in large cities, bathed in concrete, commerce and the relentless rhetoric of conflict, when we long for healing and replenishment, it is to the earth we must return and find ourselves again in sacred silence.”

Georgia’s next questions to ponder here are: “Where do you return to yourself? Where do you find or make room sacred silence in your life?”

Sadly, by 1972, O'Keeffe had lost much of her eyesight due to macular degeneration, leaving her with only peripheral vision. She stopped oil painting without assistance in 1972. In 1973, O'Keeffe hired Juan Hamilton as a live-in assistant and then a caretaker. Hamilton was a potter and taught O'Keeffe to work with clay. One of her modernist sculptures recently sold at auction for \$200K dollars. Hamilton encouraged her to resume painting with watercolors despite her deteriorating eyesight and helped her write her autobiography. She died in 1986 in Santa Fe at age 98.

In Native American culture, when death comes, the family of the deceased sits for successive days outside the chamber where the body lies, facing East and chanting prayers to help the departing soul on its way. Their prayers end with a refrain so fitting for the extraordinary and unforgettable Georgia O'Keeffe:

*In beauty, it is finished. In beauty, it is finished.
In beauty, it is finished. In beauty, it is finished.*

May her spirit live on to inspire us at Ghost Ranch and wherever we may find her. Blessed be. Blessed we. Blessed Georgia. And Amen.

©2024 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. Author and sources may be quoted with proper attribution.