

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Contested Terrain

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE AND NEW MEXICO:

A Sense of Place.

By Barbara Buhler Lynes, Lesley Poling-Kempes, and Frederick W. Turner.

Princeton Univ. Press. 143 pp. \$39.95

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE.

By Bice Curiger, Carter Ratcliff, and Peter Schneemann.

Hatje Cantz. 200 pp. \$55

Reviewed by Roxana Robinson

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) is one of the great American artists. Her powerful, evocative images—flowers, bones, shells, and languorous, rose-colored hills—have become part of our visual repertory. She was a member of the American modernists, innovators who embraced the liberating power of abstraction and the mechanical innovations of photography, but her work looked like no one else's. A colorist who reveled in lush and exuberant hues, she produced mysterious, semiabstract compositions, spare but full of emotional resonance.

From the beginning, O'Keeffe's art drew a powerful response. Her work received enthusiastic critical attention and sold rapidly. Her private life was considered news—she modeled for, then married, her dealer, the famous and influential photographer Alfred Stieglitz. O'Keeffe was important at once.

In the normal course of things, once an artist is seen as important, she becomes the focus of scholarship. The facts of the life and the art will be established and docu-

mented, and subsequent scholars, as well as popular writers, can rely on this dependable foundation.

The case of Georgia O'Keeffe is different. At one of her earliest exhibitions, in 1917, she was described by an enthusiastic but uninformed critic as “the offspring of an Irish father and a Levantine mother, [who] was born in Virginia and has grown up in the vast provincial solitudes of Texas.” So began a pattern of erroneous information about O'Keeffe. Her father's family was indeed Irish, but her mother's was Hungarian; she was born in Wisconsin, lived there until the age of 15, then moved to Virginia. Nearly 120 years after her birth, a bewildering array of confusing and contradictory versions of O'Keeffe's story still confronts the public.

The responsibility for this lies partly with O'Keeffe herself. At the start of her career, the intimacy of her work (not to mention that of Stieglitz's nude photographs of her) evoked similarly intimate responses from the critics. In 1921, one wrote that “her art is gloriously female. . . .



Georgia O'Keeffe poses outdoors beside an easel in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1960.

Her great painful and ecstatic climaxes make us at last to know something the man has always wanted to know. . . . The organs that differentiate the sex speak. Women, one should judge, always feel, when they feel strongly, through the womb." O'Keeffe found all this intrusive, and wrote that she had "a queer feeling of being invaded" when she read about herself. She disliked having her work placed in the critics' contexts.

Her private life was open to public commentary as well. A few years after she married Stieglitz, he began a highly visible liaison with a younger woman. In the early 1930s, O'Keeffe suffered a severe breakdown and was hospitalized. Increasingly thereafter she shunned scrutiny and refused interviews, though her fame continued to grow.

A few years after Stieglitz's death in 1946, O'Keeffe moved to New Mexico, where she lived the rest of her life in professional seclusion. Her work still received acclaim, though she lapsed into relative obscurity during the late 1950s and the 1960s. In 1970, "rediscovered" through an excellent retrospective at the Whitney

Museum, she became a public figure again. Still deeply protective of her privacy, she announced, in her own book, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (1976), "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."

O'Keeffe had long refused most interview requests and had never designated a biographer. More significant in terms of art history, she had denied most requests to reproduce her paintings in articles, dissertations, and books: She refused to have her work defined by other people. The dearth of available images made art history studies of her work problematic, and scholarship languished. All of this resulted in an odd paradox: At the time of her death, at 98, O'Keeffe was one of the best-known artists in the country, but virtually no scholarly work had been done on her.

One popular biography had appeared, *Portrait of an Artist* (1980), by Laurie Lisle. Intrepidly, Lisle took on the task despite the fact that O'Keeffe and her friends and family refused to cooperate. The biography suffers from these lacks, and its subject—O'Keeffe herself—is

oddly inert, but the book delivers a good deal of basic information correctly.

After O’Keeffe died in 1986, a spate of books appeared (a biography by this writer among them). A posthumous memoir by her friend Anita Pollitzer was published, *A Woman on Paper* (1988), followed by *Lovingly, Georgia: The Complete Correspondence of Georgia O’Keeffe and Anita Pollitzer* (1990). Unfortunately, both are rife with errors, including a misidentified Stieglitz photograph on the memoir’s cover, misdated letters in the collection of correspondence, and a misleading quotation in Benita Eisler’s introduction to the letters.

Eisler went on to publish a relentlessly unsympathetic biography, *O’Keeffe and Stieglitz: An American Romance* (1991), which presents O’Keeffe as cold hearted, mean spirited, and manipulative. Eisler’s gloss of contempt covers every aspect of O’Keeffe’s behavior, and she misquotes and quotes out of context to support her view. Particularly vivid is her alteration of a 1929 letter from Beck Strand (wife of photographer Paul Strand). Strand describes an uproarious dinner at which she and O’Keeffe teased the prim, rather shy artist John Marin. In Eisler’s version, O’Keeffe is aggressively and unpleasantly sexual: “‘I’m going to put your little bit of a thing in my pocket,’ Georgia taunted him.” The actual quote, however, is merely playful: “You little bit of a thing, I could put you in my pocket.”

Without an established body of scholarly work, there seemed to be no standard for reviewers assessing these books; mistakes and poor scholarship went unremarked. The unreliable books passed unchallenged into the O’Keeffe literature. Today, excellent scholarly accounts do exist of both O’Keeffe’s work and life, but the others are still in circulation, offered to the public by libraries, museums, and bookstores. In the absence of critical accounting, it seems that anyone can say anything about O’Keeffe. Scholars compound the confusion by using as sources the unreliable texts as well as the reliable ones.

Two new books—both museum catalogues with essays and handsome

illustrations, both presented as scholarly—occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of reliability. *Georgia O’Keeffe and New Mexico: A Sense of Place* is on the reliable end. The illustrations are beautifully reproduced, and the book’s three essays are intelligent, carefully researched, and elegantly presented.

Barbara Buhler Lynes, a distinguished O’Keeffe scholar and the curator of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, compares the New Mexico landscape paintings to photographs of the actual sites. Accompanied by Lynes’s articulate text, the images reveal the ways in which O’Keeffe worked her transformations—how her brush smoothed and burnished, how she turned a bare and nondescript hill into a mysteriously powerful presence, lush, intense, and full of mythic resonance. In the second essay, Lesley Poling-Kempes, a historian, describes O’Keeffe’s arrival in the region and its particular appeal to her. She also discusses the spectacular geology of the area (though without crediting earlier work done on this). Finally, Frederick W. Turner, a Santa Fe writer, provides a thoughtful meditation on the landscape and O’Keeffe’s response to it through her art.

Georgia O’Keeffe, by Bice Curiger, Carter Ratcliff, and Peter Schneemann, is an exhibition catalogue from the Zurich Kunsthhaus that reveals the peculiar relationship between O’Keeffe’s work and Europe. Historically, this relationship was nearly nonexistent: After the carnage of World War I, Stieglitz deemed Europe unsafe as a repository of art. He would not sell to European museums or collectors, and as a consequence, the artists he represented were all but unknown outside the United States.

It’s encouraging to see European scholarship focusing on O’Keeffe, but the three essays in this book—one by an American scholar and two by Swiss scholars—are marred by Eurocentrism, unfamiliarity with American scholarship on O’Keeffe, and many factual errors: It’s untrue that “O’Keeffe had no qualms about [making] commercial art”; there is no evidence that

O’Keeffe and Stieglitz “became lovers soon after” they met; Stieglitz’s photos of her in the 1921 exhibition were not “always unnamed”; O’Keeffe first traveled to Santa Fe not in 1929 but in 1917; a blurred snapshot of O’Keeffe in Texas is misattributed to Stieglitz, who never went there, and so on. Moreover, the translations from German are remarkably poor. O’Keeffe is quoted as saying, “A hill or a tree don’t make a good picture, just because they are a hill or a tree.” Her actual words, before translation into German and back, are: “A hill or a tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree.”

So—two more books on O’Keeffe, full

of sumptuous illustrations, billowing with speculative commentary, and each one, like all those before it, offered as the latest word on the artist. There never will be a last word, of course, but it would have been nice to discover one patch of level ground, a place where *all* the facts were laid out clearly and unmistakably, so that ensuing discussions could be informed as well as imaginative.

>ROXANA ROBINSON is the author of *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Life* (1989), a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and a nominee for the National Book Critics Circle Award. A Guggenheim fellow, she is the author most recently of the novel *Sweetwater* (2003).

Old Toxin, New Vessels

RISING FROM THE MUCK:

The New Anti-Semitism in Europe.

By Pierre-André Taguieff. Ivan R. Dee. 203 pp. \$26

THE RETURN OF ANTI-SEMITISM.

By Gabriel Schoenfeld. Encounter. 193 pp. \$25.95

Reviewed by Samuel G. Freedman

When Pope John Paul II visited Damascus in 2001, the Syrian dictator Bashar Assad welcomed him with an invocation of shared beliefs. The Jews, Assad told the pontiff, seek to “kill the principles of all religions with the same mentality in which they betrayed Jesus Christ.” Perhaps it had escaped Assad’s notice that the Roman Catholic Church disavowed the charge of deicide against Jews nearly 40 years earlier, amid the Second Vatican Council’s reforms. Perhaps Assad overlooked the pope’s remarkable personal efforts to reconcile Rome with Israel, culminating in his pilgrimage to the Western Wall and Yad Vashem. Or perhaps none of these realities mattered much to Assad, a Muslim only too eager to

adopt an anti-Semitic doctrine that Catholicism had repudiated.

Both Pierre-André Taguieff and Gabriel Schoenfeld recount the Assad episode in their new books on the resurgence of anti-Semitism, for that moment concisely and vividly represents a passing of the torch of Jew hatred from its traditional home in Christian Europe to its contemporary base in the Muslim world. And because the Muslim world stretches from the immigrant slums of Paris through the Middle East and eastward to Malaysia, this bigotry has burgeoned into a truly global phenomenon. It is indulged by the Western European intelligentsia, accepted by the antiglobalism movement, and tolerated on American college campuses. It is bound