

Equal Under the Sky: Georgia O'Keeffe and Twentieth Century Feminism

By Linda M. Grasso
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Reviewed by Laurie Lisle

In *Equal Under the Sky*, English professor Linda Grasso has done meticulous research and analysis in examining artist Georgia O'Keeffe's relationship to feminism. The title of the book comes from a phrase—"that all men and women stand equal under the sky"—the artist, a member of the feminist National Woman's Party, wrote in a 1944 letter to Eleanor Roosevelt seeking her support for an Equal Rights Amendment. The important issue of O'Keeffe's adherence to feminist ideals has bedeviled many of us who have written about this independent and self-actualizing New Woman, who, disappointingly, turned her back on 1970s feminism at the end of her long life (1887-1986).

Organized into six sections, Grasso's scholarly study describes the way 1910s feminism profoundly shaped the young O'Keeffe by fueling her aspirations and enabling her to break gender barriers to become a professional painter (Fig. 1). It enumerates the ways her work was early on endorsed and supported by women teachers, women friends, women collectors, women critics, and women's clubs, alongside the advocacy of her husband, photographer Alfred Stieglitz. The book also elucidates the way the elderly artist inspired younger generations of women. Grasso goes on to explain how O'Keeffe mythologized her trajectory as an artist in her profusely illustrated 1976 book, *Georgia O'Keeffe*. Rich with perceptions and new primary materials, *Equal Under the Sky* ends by elaborating O'Keeffe's ambivalent relationship to feminism.

On the spectrum between equality and difference feminism, O'Keeffe stood for equality and so-called male values. A member of the first generation of American modernists, she sought gender parity at a time when her husband and male art critics were interpreting her



Fig. 1. Josephine B. Marks, photo of Georgia O'Keeffe (ca. 1938). Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

abstractions and enlarged flowers as expressions of feminine eroticism and sensibility, undermining, in her eyes, her position as a painter. "The feminism she embraced and practiced ennobled individualism, self-expression, and professional achievement as ultimate forms of liberty," Grasso states (4), instead of a traditional submissive feminine role.

When second wave feminism emerged in the later part of the twentieth century, O'Keeffe was in her eighties. As Judy Chicago and other feminist artists asserted a fundamental link between women's bodies and their imagery, it was exactly what O'Keeffe had so strenuously resented and rejected at the hands of men in the 1920s. Regarding classification as a woman artist as a form of inferiority and injustice, in old age she turned her back on the resurgence of feminist activism and solidarity.

Nevertheless, as Grasso points out, O'Keeffe's strength and single-mindedness attracted the attention of hundreds of younger women, many of whom wrote admiring letters to her (including yours truly), which O'Keeffe carefully kept and eventually gave to Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Unlike most other researchers in the archive at

Yale, Grasso carefully examined them, documenting O'Keeffe's enormous influence on other middle-class white women, even as the octogenarian artist denied the immense impact of feminist ideas on her younger self.

Grasso argues dauntlessly that O'Keeffe's large body of paintings is a powerful feminist act. "O'Keeffe's art dislodges gendered assumptions about women's sensibilities, sources of power, and abilities to render the world imaginatively," she writes. "It is radical because of its potential to motivate feminist creativity, which is a kind of activism" (200). Despite the aged artist's disapproval of the modern women's liberation movement, it was what brought her the many accolades that fulfilled her ambition to be regarded as a well-respected and even great American artist. Even for someone like myself, who has been examining and following the O'Keeffe story for forty years, this book is a fascinating and welcome addition to the oeuvre. •

Laurie Lisle is the author of the first biography of Georgia O'Keeffe, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe* (1980). She is also the author of *Louise Nevelson: A Passionate Life* (1990).