

**FLESH OR FLORA: READING THE PAINTINGS OF O'KEEFFE  
THROUGH BAKHTIN'S CARNIVALESQUE**



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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled “Flesh or Flora: Reading the Paintings of O’Keeffe through Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque,” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Preeti Kumar, Lecturer-in-charge, Department of English.

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## **CERTIFICATE**

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## Introduction

This project is a study of the art works by the 20th century American artist, Georgia O'Keeffe through the Carnavalesque theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnavalesque is a literary mode characterised by a mocking or satirical challenge to the authority and the traditional social hierarchy. Such an idea was first introduced in Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and later developed in *Rabelais and His World*. He used this theory to ponder on the power structured writings of the period, heightened by conventional and traditional methods, and to reverse them, as happens in the traditional form of carnival. For Bakhtin, it was important that the work itself should embody the very spirit of carnival through mobilizing humour, satire and grotesquery in all its forms. Bakhtin's concept is often seen as a utopian antidote to repressive forms of power everywhere and a celebration of the possibility for affirmative change. However in contrast to this, Terry Eagleton argued in his book on Walter Benjamin that carnivalesque was nothing more than a concept advocating change.

The Carnival was sanctioned mediocrity in celebrations in which all of the conventions and rules were let go by the Church and the king, norms were thrown off and mocked under the premise for the welfare and entertainment for the peasantry, under the premises that it would enable them to work hard for the rest of the year. Role play and role reversal were one of the projected qualities of the Carnival. Kings would dress up as peasants, and peasants would dress up as kings. The typical power relations were taken away from the rest of the year and in fact reciprocated and a mockery of what was official and celebrated whatever was not official. This was because the Carnival was featured with the spirit of possibilities, of renewal, of the tearing down of old forms and creations of new ones. Carnival is opposed to, in

Bakhtin's words, "all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook." (Bakhtin 3). It is a world of constant

reinvention and renewal. The Carnival does not seek to uphold the old order of things, but to create newer and novel ideals.

The elements of Carnavalesque can be observed in the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe. Georgia O'Keeffe, born in 1887, was an American artist, who introduced novel methods and demanded multiple readings of her works. She is known as the 'Mother of American Modernism'. She painted nature in a way that portrayed how it made her feel. She wanted people to take time and look at her works with a widened perspective. She is best known for her paintings of flowers and desert landscapes. She played an important part in the upgradation of modern art in America, becoming the first woman artist to become noted in New York in 1920s. Her eccentric ways of representing nature and disentangling its shapes and forms deafened conventional forms for most. She painted of life forms in decay, of skulls and bones that she found in the desert landscapes in New Mexico. She said, "To me they're beautiful as anything I know ... The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even though it is vast and empty and untouchable." (Robinson 365)

O'Keeffe was very assertive as a woman but was always very keen to assert that she was an important artist, not just an important female artist. O'Keeffe often stayed in New York creating dark, vertical paintings of mammoth architectural erections (skyscrapers) by simple geographic shapes such as rectangles, circles reverting to Precisionism and modernity in her works.

Her works were treated as different and were looked down at terming them “pretty or beautiful”, which were considered by most male artists as insults to their work. They said that O’Keeffe’s works had way too bright colours and were not good enough. However, throughout her life, O’Keeffe desired liberty from artistic trends, from pressures of the mainstream art world, from the fetters of male dominated society. And it was by transgressing expectations that she came up with a revolutionary and novel body of work. She was unapologetically herself all through her life which was highly reflected in her works brimming with her eccentricity and individual spirit.



## Chapter 1

### Carnavalesque Theory And Bakhtin

The *Carnavalesque* is a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humour and chaos. It originated as "carnival" in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and was further developed in *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin traces the origins of the carnivalesque to the concept of carnival, itself related to the Feast of Fools. This was a medieval festival held originally by the sub-deacons of the cathedral, at about the time of the Feast of the Circumcision (1 January). The humbler cathedral officials performed burlesques of the sacred ceremonies, releasing "the natural loud beneath the cassock."

Bakhtin derives carnival and its influence in literature from the reign of the "Serio-comical," with the examples of Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire. *Socratic dialogue* is a genre of literary prose developed in Greece in the fourth century BCE. It is preserved in the works of Plato and Xenophon. The discussion of moral and philosophical problems between two or more characters in a dialogue is an illustration of one version of the Socratic method. The dialogues are either dramatic or narrative and Socrates is often the main participant.

The genre of *Menippean satire* is a form of satire, usually in prose, which has a length and structure similar to that of a novel and resorts to attacking mental attitudes rather than specific individuals. Other features found in Menippean satire are different forms of parody and mythological burlesque, a critique of the myths inherited from traditional culture, a rhapsodic nature, a fragmented narrative, the combination of many different targets, and the rapid movement between styles and perceptions.

The term is used by classical grammarians and by philologists mostly to refer to satires in prose. Typical mental attitudes attacked and ridiculed by Menippean satires are "pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds," which are treated as diseases of the intellect.

*Feast of Fools* was a popular festival during the Middle Ages, held on January 1, particularly in France, in which a mock bishop or pope was elected, church ritual was parodied, and low and high officials changed places. Such festivals were probably a Christian adaptation of the pagan festivities of the Saturnalia. By the 13th century these feasts had become a burlesque of Christian morality and worship. In spite of repeated prohibitions and penalties imposed by the Council of Basel in 1431, the feasts were not put to a stop entirely until the 16th century. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin discusses carnivalesque, a particular speech-genre which occurs across a variety of cultural sites, most notably in carnival itself. A carnival is a moment when everything (except violence) is permitted. It occurs on the border between art and life, and is a kind of life shaped according to a pattern of play. It is usually marked by displays of excess and grotesqueness. It is a type of performance, but this performance is communal, with no boundary between performers and audience. It creates a situation in which diverse voices are heard and interact, breaking down conventions and enabling genuine dialogue. It creates the chance for a new perspective and a new order of things, by showing the relative nature of all that exists.

The popular tradition of carnival was believed by Bakhtin to carry a particular wisdom which can be traced back to the ancient world. For Bakhtin, carnival and carnivalesque create an alternative social space, characterised by freedom, equality

and abundance. During carnival, rank (otherwise pervasive in medieval society) is abolished and everyone is equal. People were reborn into truly human relations, which were not simply imagined but experienced. The body is here figured not as the individual or 'bourgeois ego' but as a growing, constantly renewed collective which is exaggerated and immeasurable. Life manifests itself not as isolated individuals but as a collective ancestral body. This is not, however, a collective order, since it is also continually in change and renewal. The self is also transgressed through practices such as masking.

*Carnival* unites and blends the systems of religion, is a kind of ritualised pageantry which exhibits a unique perspective. It is a brief moment in which life escapes its official trails and accepts utopian freedom. It is a form of life at once real and ideal, universal and without remainder. Its demarking feature is festivity – life lived as festive. It is also sanctioned by the highest ideal aims of human existence, not by the world of practical conditions.

Carnival also develops an optimistic alternative vision. It is not simply a deconstruction of dominant culture, but an alternative way of living collective body which is constantly renewed based on a pattern of play. It prefigured a humanity constructed otherwise, as a utopia of abundance and freedom. It abolished barriers among people which were created through hegemonies, replacing it with a foresight of mutual cooperation and equality. Through carnival and carnivalesque literature, a *world upside-down* is created, ideas and truths are endlessly scrutinised and tried, and all demand equal dialogic status. The "jolly relativity" of all things is proclaimed by alternative voices within the carnivalized literary text that confiscated the authoritative voice of the hierarchy through their mingling of "high culture" with the profane or the "polluted". For Bakhtin it is within literary forms like the novel that

one finds the site of resistance to authority and the place where cultural, and potentially political, change can take place.

For Bakhtin, carnivalization has a deep historical foundation in the genre of the ancient Menippean satire. In Menippean satire, the three planes of Heaven (Olympus), the Underworld (Hades), and Earth are all treated with the logic and activity of Carnival. For example, in the underworld, earthly inequalities are dissolved; emperors lose their crowns and meet on equal terms with beggars. This intentional ambiguity allows for the seeds of the “polyphonic” novel, in which narratologic and character voices are set free to speak subversively or shockingly, but without the writer of the text indulging between character and reader.

Mikhail Bakhtin's famous "Carnival and Carnavalesque" deals with the event of the carnival, which was common throughout European history as central to celebration. Bakhtin opens "Carnival and Carnavalesque" by noting that the carnival is not a performance, and does not differentiate the spectator from the performer. All people who take part in the carnival "live it" but it is not an extension of the "real world" or "real life" but rather, as Bakhtin puts it, "the world standing on its head", the world upside down. The carnival for Bakhtin is an event in which all rules, inhibitions, restrictions and regulations which determine the course of everyday life are suspended, and especially all form of hierarchy in society.

Bakhtin points out that the carnival was confined in time, not in space. It penetrated the house as well and did not exist just in the public sphere or town square. But the town square and its adjacent streets were the central site of the carnival, for they embodied and symbolized the carnivalesque idea of being universal and belonging to all people.

Carnival is also taken to offer an optimistic alternative vision. It is not simply a deconstruction of dominant culture, but an alternative way of living based on a pattern of play. It prefigured a humanity constructed otherwise, as a utopia of abundance and freedom. It eliminated barriers among people created by hierarchies, replacing it with a vision of mutual coordination and equality. Individuals are also contained into a kind of lived collective body which is constantly renewed.

Prefiguring James Scott's analysis of 'hidden transcripts', Bakhtin portrays carnival as an expression of a 'second life' of the people, against their containment in the dominant ideology. It replaces the false unity of the dominant system with a lived unity in contingency. It creates a zone in which new birth or emergence becomes possible, against the futility of dominant norms. It also encourages the return of repressed creative energies. It is joyous in affirming that the norms, necessities and/or systems of the current are temporary, historically variable and relative and will come to an end eventually. Carnival bridges the gap between holism (which necessarily absorbs its other) and the imperative to refuse authority (which necessarily restores exclusions): it absorbs its authoritarian other in a way which destroys the threat it poses. It is also simultaneously ecological and social, absorbing the self in a network of relations. Bakhtin insists that it opposes both 'naturalism', the idea of a fixed natural order, and ideas of fixed social hierarchies. It views ecology and social life as relational becoming. Perhaps a complete world cannot exist without carnival, for such a world would have no sense of its own contingency and relativity.

Mikhail Bakhtin's four categories of the carnivalesque sense of the world:

- *Familiar and free interaction between people*: carnival often brought the unlikeliest of people together and encouraged the interaction and free expression of themselves in unity.
- *Eccentric behaviour*: unacceptable behaviour is welcomed and accepted in carnival, and one's natural behaviour can be revealed without the consequences.
- *Carnivalistic mésalliances*: familiar and free format of carnival allows everything that may normally be separated to reunite — Heaven and Hell, the young and the old, etc.
- *Sacrilegious*: the carnival for Bakhtin is a site of ungodliness, of blasphemy, profanity and parodies on things that are sacred. For Bakhtin, these categories are abstract notions of freedom and equality, but rather a lived experience of the world manifested in sensual forms of ritualistic acts that are played out as if they were a part of life itself.

Carnavalesque images often use an approach Bakhtin terms '*grotesque realism*', drawing on the idea of the grotesque. This style cuts through the boundaries between physical life and the field of art, bringing bodily functions into the field of art. It also celebrates incompleteness, transgression and the disruption of expectations. It often performs a kind of symbolic degradation aimed at bringing elevated phenomena 'down to earth' – to the material, bodily or sensuous level. This was not conceived as an absolute destruction but as a return to the field of reproduction, regeneration and rebirth. The spirit of carnival was personified as a fat, boisterous man who consumed vast quantities of food and alcohol – similar to Dickens' *Ghost of Christmas Present*.

The carnival body is seen as transgressing and outgrowing its own limits. This effect is achieved by giving importance to the sacrifices and practices which connect the body to the world: eating, drinking, birth, and so on. This is seen as a kind of “materialism”. The “material” in this excessive, consumptive, reproductive and bodily sense must be differentiated to the material conceived in terms of privatisation and accumulation, as well as in contrast to its medieval adversary, the spiritual or ‘higher’ plane.

In capitalism, the body breaks away from the generating earth and people. Later uses of grotesque realism in literature tend to lose the universalist and holistic implications of the folk view of the body. Instead of finished forms, the different forms of life – animal, plant, human – are portrayed as incomplete and as passing into one another (think, for instance, of gargoyles with mixed human-animal features. This testifies to a view of being as incomplete). Bakhtin believes that the grotesque is counterposed to the classical aesthetic of ready-made, completed being. The carnivalesque body in contrast expressed ideas of simultaneous death and rebirth. It is counterposed to the classicist idea of art as the pursuit of the sublime.

Carnival has become a substructure for activist initiatives such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, the Laboratory of the Insurrectionary Imagination and Reclaim the Streets, particularly the Carnival against Capital. The free party movement can also be seen as a reclamation of the spirit of carnival. The carnivalesque style of activism emphasises the deconstruction of relations, including those between activists and police, to create an uncontrollable space. Such tactics can be remarkably successful in disorienting and repelling the monologists of state power. Reclaiming contingency and carnival in the dead heartlands of the core,

where people are strongly invested in their official identities and the preservation of an order which they believe protects them, is a more difficult task. Traditional carnivals continue to exist in places ranging from Germany and Notting Hill, London to the Caribbean and Brazil. Other related festivities, such as holi in India, also persist. While state regulation is a problem, such events still provide platforms for alternative visions and for political critique.

One can also point to carnivalesque aspects in practices such as graffiti, which may bring 'down to earth' the contemporaries. The grotesque, exaggerated body and the bringing down-to-earth of systemic abstractions are present even in such small, apparently apolitical gestures. They signify what is amiss in the official picture – much as those who perform such acts are often excluded from the official world. They create a full reality in which the world is restored to its fullness and creativity.

Overall, therefore, carnivalesque remains a potential counter-power in everyday life and activism, but is 'cramped' in its potential by the repressive construction of spaces of monologue. Medieval carnival was possible because the spaces it inhabited could be carved-out and defended through the 'arts of resistance' and the power of the weak. There is a need to recompose such powers to resist, in order to recreate spaces where alternatives can proliferate.



## Chapter 2

### Georgia O'Keeffe: The Biography

Georgia O'Keeffe was a 20th century American painter and pioneer of American modernism. She is best known for her canvases depicting flowers, skyscrapers, animal skulls and south-eastern landscapes. Georgia O'Keeffe was born on November 15, 1887, in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League in New York. Photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz arranged O'Keeffe her first gallery show in 1916 and the couple married in 1924. Considered as the "mother of American modernism," O'Keeffe moved to New Mexico after her husband's death and was inspired by the landscape to create numerous well-known paintings. Georgia O'Keeffe died on March 6, 1986 at the age of 98.

As a child, O'Keeffe was curious about the natural world and exhibited her interest to become an artist, which her mother encouraged by arranging lessons with a local artist. Art appreciation was a family affair for O'Keeffe: her two grandmothers and two of her sisters also enjoyed painting. O'Keeffe continued to study art, as well as academic subjects at Sacred Heart Academy, a high school in Madison, Wisconsin. While her family moved to Williamsburg, Virginia in 1902, O'Keeffe lived with her aunt in Wisconsin and attended Madison High School. She joined her family in 1903 when she was 15 and already a budding artist driven by an independent spirit. In Williamsburg, she attended Chatham Episcopal institute, a boarding school, where she became to be well known for her artistic talent and flourished herself as the art editor of the school yearbook.

After graduating from high school, O'Keeffe went to Chicago where she attended the Art Institute of Chicago, from 1905 to 1906. She ranked at the top of her competitive class. O'Keeffe travelled to New York City in 1907 to continue her art studies. She took classes at the Art Students League where she learned realist painting techniques from William Merritt Chase, F. Luis Mora and Kenyon Cox. One of her still lifes, *Dead Rabbit with Copper Pot* (1908), earned her the prize of attending the League's summer school in Lake George, New York.

Georgia O'Keeffe, created innovative impressionist images through modernism and abstract art that challenged perceptions and evolved constantly throughout her wide expanding and quintessential career. Securing knowledge on art, she was introduced to the principles and philosophies of Arthur Wesley Dow, who espoused created works of art based on personal style, design, and interpretation of the subjects rather than trying to copy or represent them. This has caused a major change in the way she felt about and approached art as can be observed in her charcoal drawings that she produced in 1915 that led to a total abstraction. Soon after completing her art education , she dropped out her promising career as an artist as she felt caged in the traditional mimetic art representation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century academia.

Her teacher William Merritt Chase, was an exponent in bringing out the impressionist method into the platform of artistry. He taught his students how to express detail in simple and direct manner, often with a single brush stroke – a technique that had been influenced by European impressionism. On the whole, Chase advocated the expression of freedom , but in its own limits. Georgia O'Keeffe was able to imitate her teacher well, as is exemplified in her *Dead Rabbit with Copper Pot*(1908). While she followed Chase's methods in her art , she was exposed to the

modernistic techniques and philosophical currents during her visits to art galleries and exhibitions such as that of Alfred Stieglitz's. Although O'Keeffe was successful in replicating the works of her teachers' traditional artworks, she was unable to satisfy her own artistic urges. She hence, exhibited a shift from her charcoal drawings to oil paintings. Also, O'Keeffe found it inevitably difficult to survive in a male-dominated art industry.

While she continued to develop as an artist, she visited art galleries to expand her ideas, in particular 291, founded by photographers Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen. Located at 291 5th Avenue, Steichen's former studio, 291 was a pioneering gallery that elevated the art of photography and introduced the avant-garde work of modern European and American artists. After a year of study in New York City, O'Keeffe returned to Virginia where she found her parents in hard time financially and hence, decided to return to Chicago in 1908 to work as a commercial artist. After two years, she returned to Virginia, eventually moving with her family to Charlottesville.

In 1912, she pursued an art class at the summer school of the University of Virginia, where she studied with Alon Bement. A faculty member of Teachers College at Columbia University, Bement introduced O'Keeffe to the revolutionary ideas of his Columbia colleague, Arthur Wesley Dow, whose approach to composition and design was influenced by the principles of Japanese art. O'Keeffe began experimenting with her art, breaking from realism and developing her own visual expression through more abstract compositions.

As she experimented with her art, O'Keeffe taught art at public schools in Amarillo, Texas, from 1912 to 1914. She was also Bement's teaching assistant during the summers and took class from Dow at Teacher's College. In 1915, while teaching at Columbia College, O'Keeffe began a series of abstract charcoal drawings, and was one of the first American artists to practice pure abstraction, according to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

O'Keeffe mailed a few of her drawings to Anita Pollitzer, a friend and former classmate, who showed the work to Stieglitz, the influential art dealer. Taken by O'Keeffe's work, he and O'Keeffe began a correspondence and, unbeknownst to her, he exhibited ten of her drawings at 291 in 1916. She confronted him about the exhibit, but allowed him to continue to show the work. In 1917, he presented her first solo show. A year later, she moved to New York, and Stieglitz found a place for her to live and work. He and O'Keeffe married in 1924. They lived in New York City and spent their summers in Lake George, New York, where Stieglitz's family had a home.

As an artist, Stieglitz, who was 23 years older than O'Keeffe, found in her a muse, taking over 300 photographs of her, including both portraits and nudes. As an art dealer, he promoted her work and aided her to excel in her career. She joined Stieglitz's circle of artist friends including Steichen, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, John Marin, and Paul Strand. Inspired by the vibrancy of the modern art movement, she began to experiment with perspective, painting larger-scale close-ups of flowers, the first of which was *Petunia No. 2*, which was exhibited in 1925, followed by works such as *Black Iris* (1926) and *Oriental Poppies* (1928). "If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small. 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 - I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers."(Robinson 52)

O'Keeffe also took her experimental strokes to the New York City skyscrapers, the symbol of modernity, in paintings including *City Night* (1926), *Shelton Hotel, New York No. 1* (1926) and *Radiator Bldg—Night, New York* (1927). Following numerous solo exhibitions, O'Keeffe had her first retrospective, *Paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe*, which opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 1927. By this time, she had flourished as one of the most important and successful American artists, which was a major achievement for a female artist in the male-dominated art world. Her pioneering success would make her a feminist icon for later generations.

In the summer of 1929, O'Keeffe would find a new direction for her art when she made her first visit to northern New Mexico. The landscape, architecture and local Navajo culture inspired her, and she would return to New Mexico, which she called "the faraway," in the summers to paint. Simultaneously, she produced iconic paintings including *Black Cross, New Mexico* (1929), *Cow's Skull: Red, White and Blue* (1931) and *Ram's Head, White Hollycock, Hills* (1935), among other works. In the 1940s, O'Keeffe's works were encompassed in retrospectives at the Art Institute of Chicago (1943) and at the Museum of Modern Art (1946), which was the museum's first retrospective of a female artist's work.

O'Keeffe split her time between New York, living with Stieglitz, and painting in New Mexico. She was particularly inspired by Ghost Ranch, north of Abiquiú, and

she decided to move into a house there in 1940. Five years later, O'Keeffe bought a second house in Abiquiú.

On July 13, 1946, at the age of 82, Stieglitz died of a fatal stroke. Three years after Stieglitz's death, O'Keeffe moved to New Mexico in 1949, the same year she was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In the 1950s and 1960s, O'Keeffe spent much of her time traveling the world, identifying and discovering inspirations from the places she visited. Among her new work was a series depicting aerial views of clouds as is seen in *Sky above Clouds, IV* (1965). In 1970, a retrospective of her work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City renewed her popularity, especially among members of the feminist art movement.

In many ways her life incarnated the message of Virginia Woolf's iconic essay 'A Room of One's Own'. O'Keeffe disdained political art, which she found illustrative and lowbrow, and she would have agreed with Oscar Wilde's 'Art for Art's Sake' statement that 'All art is quite useless'. When the US was reeling from the Great Depression, the editor of the Marxist Journal, *New Masses* accused her of insensitivity towards poor. However in a debate with him, she defended herself by saying that, as a respected artist, she offered as a model for women in general.

## Chapter 3

### The Carnavalesque in O'Keeffe's Painting

American Modernism is an artistic and cultural movement which began in the twentieth century and peaked between the two World Wars. It was marked by a deliberate deviation from the tradition, by the use of innovative forms of expression keeping with the sociocultural evolution. Georgia O'Keeffe became one of the lead artists of the period by challenging the boundaries of American artistic style with her paintings, which combined abstraction and representation. The 'Mother of American Modernism', though famous for her revolutionary paintings of enlarged flowers, New York skyscrapers, South Eastern landscapes and animal skulls, was subject a lot of criticism throughout her career. The subjects of O'Keeffe's paintings caught the attention of the collectors and critics who respond with alacrity. Her varied methods of reproducing her perception of nature into wild canvases, which evidently shows us how she deviated from the existent dominant styles of art and artists, are illustrations of carnivalesque, creating humorous and chaotic interpretation of the feministic art works.

Unlike traditional flower painters throughout history, she painted flowers as abstract and mysterious objects. She achieved this by focusing close-up on the flower forms, simplifying the shapes, and filling her canvas with vivid brushstrokes and colours. O'Keeffe painted flowers from such a close view that they do not look like flowers any more. The abstract form of the flower in *The Black Iris* hints at female physicality and promotes female bodies as both powerful and beautiful. As it lacks stems or leaves and forming a very abstract shape, the painting, without its name, would be very difficult for the viewers to understand that a flower is depicted. The

shapes and textures in the painting might remind one of the sexual parts of a woman's body. The velvet look of the petals seems to represent a similar texture to that of human skin. And because it is difficult to tell what exactly is being depicted in the painting, *The Black Iris* demands the attention of its viewers. The mystery over what they are seeing demands that the viewers pay extra attention to her work. The mysterious nature of the painting paired with its similarity to female genitalia promotes the female body as powerful substance because it demands the viewer's attention.



Title: Black Iris III

Created: 1926

Medium: Oil on canvas

Location: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY

Dimensions: 91.4 cm × 75.9 cm (36 in × 29 7/8 inch)





Title: Petunia No. 2

Created: 1924

Medium: Oil on canvas

Genre: Modernism

Location: Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe

Dimensions: w30 x h36 inch

In 1925, she painted her first large scale flower painting, *Petunia No.2*. She painted the flowers, enlarging their view. By magnifying her subject, she emphasised shape and colour, and brought attention to the minute intrinsic details within the flowers. This marked the beginning of her exploration on the flower theme. O'Keeffe did not give any background to the painting, to artfully draw the complete attention to the flowers. The absence of context in the painting presents them in a new light as pure abstracts. The critics' discussion of O'Keeffe's paintings were often coloured by

the popular tenets of Sigmund Freud, bringing in the wider aspect of psychoanalysis, which explains art as an expression of artist's unconscious thoughts or desires.

Such magnification of the flowers' reproductive parts specially seemed to many critics as a projective output of female genitalia. Hence, many claimed that the images that O'Keeffe created when painting flowers were works which exhibited extreme eroticism and sexuality and called her art erotic. Combining these with Freud's theory, the critics claimed that O'Keeffe's paintings were a portrayal of her want for such physical intimacy.

However, O'Keeffe strictly rejected such accusations on her artwork and claimed that she simply painted what she saw. She said that biologically, the centres of flowers are androgynous, not feminine. These flowers were not painted in praise of labia; conversely, these ravenous views are tributes to the sensual forces and ecstasy of nature. This brings in the carnivalesque notion of celebrating these connections or the "jolly relativity" of all things as proclaimed by alternate voice of hierarchy through their mingling of bodily functions, the female reproductive system or the vulva, far considered from something sacrilegious, where O'Keeffe had portrays such profanity through the pure or sacred symbol of flowers, emphasising the relation of man and nature. O'Keeffe has gently managed to mock on the placed high culture sanity by making strange socially received ideas or ideologies by replacing them with their opposite.

Though, she claims her unawareness of her paintings representing human flesh, her magnified flower paintings speak otherwise. There was only a few artists' work that was reduced to a single question: flowers or human flesh? O'Keeffe challenged the "conservative male" and normalising the concept of sexual desires and female

human body. Through her paintings, she wanted people or the popular mob to have a different reading or challenged them to offer her paintings different perspectives. Many of the white male artists across the 20<sup>th</sup> century had the privilege of being read on multiple levels, while others – be they women or artists from other parts of the world – tend to be reduced to one conservative reading. O’Keeffe wanted to challenge this. Although O’Keeffe had resisted the sexual reading into her painting which began in the 1920s it was revived by feminists in the 1970s who took her work as a statement of female empowerment. Rather than labelling her a “gendered” artist, O’Keeffe is a multifaceted artist, questioning the conservative norms of the society on equality and freedom for female. O’Keeffe has shaken her audience and the critics on different levels owing to her depiction of flowers as vagina, undermining the accepted norms through eccentric behaviour. She transgresses several received paradigms of authority, behaviour, morality, even literary genre without offering positive alternatives.

This abides by the four categories of Mikhail Bakhtin, of the carnivalesque sense of the world, the familiar and free format of carnival allows everything that may normally be separated to reunite - the idea of what is sane and insane and what is sacred and what is profane according to the conditioned standards of the society.

This relationship of woman with nature has been seen as “positive” by contemporary critics such as Katherine Hoffman, who sees this interpretation of O’Keeffe’s work as a shift from that traditional definition which equated femininity with passiveness, delicacy, decorativeness, and domesticity. O’Keeffe was considered a key figure to open up such debates, noting that women had been overshadowed by male artists for decades. She was an ardent feminist and highly believed in the feminist ideology and questioned value and how we define value when it comes to

the contributions of women. She subverted the very submissive nature of female in the society by showcasing human flesh through her magnified flower paintings and through her very lifestyle casualise women's desire for physical intimacy. In order to divert the attention of the critics from their Freudian interpretations of her work (that they stood for female flesh), pushed by male critics, she began to paint in a more representational style (representational art or figurative art refers to objects or events in the real world).

In her series of New York, O'Keeffe excelled in painting architectural structures as highly realistic and expertly employed the style of precisionism in her work (Radiator Building- Night, New York, 1927). Precisionism is a style of American painting of the 1920s and 1930s characterised by abstracted form, crisp contour, and static composition usually depicted industrial or architectural subject matter. Precisionism showed real people in real situation, real object and architecture, again subjugating to the carnivalesque imagery of mocking and reversing the power relationships. Where Art Deco was more about high society, wealth, and living the high life, precisionism was more like the nineteenth century realist art of Courbet and Manet.

During the first half of the 1900s, sky scrapers came to exemplify U.S inventiveness. O'Keeffe reduced these immense buildings to simple geometric forms that converge in the upper reaches of the dark canvas, towering even above the moon. She locates her viewers between these architectural giants, moving our necks high in tilted motion to glance at them and take it all in, or we might marvel at the staggering feet of engineering that's been erected above our heads and we might feel dwarfs in their presence. She signifies what is amiss in the official picture.



Title: Manhattan

Created: 1932

Medium: oil on canvas

Location: Not in view.

Dimension: 84 3/8 x 48 1/4 in. (214.3 x 122.4 cm.)

In 1923, O'Keeffe created a striking painting called *Manhattan* which was loud, large and the only canvas of New York skyscrapers that she or any other modernist seems to have painted with blossoms floating on its surface. The painting documents O'Keeffe's unfulfilled desire in the late 1920s and 1930s to secure a mural commission. O'Keeffe received a commission to paint a mural in the Ladies' Powder Room at Rockefeller Center, but the design was to be of flowers rather than building which were claimed to "men's subjects."

In composing *Manhattan*, O’Keeffe pushed her own stylistic envelope. Not only is the canvas twice as large as any of her other cityscapes, she also used an unconventional palette. Pitting pink against red, mauve against blue, black against white, the painting offers up a jazz-age brashness and surface tempo we seldom see in her work. O’Keeffe also infused the piece with cubist and futurist rhetoric, two vocabularies she rarely engaged as methodically as she does here. She formulated the central skyscrapers as a synthetic cubist block and animated its lower left edge with four sharp triangular forms that shoot out from the mass as if they were futurist force lines. Using cubist double and triple entendres, she made the blue wedge along the right edge read as a solid plane of colour, as empty sky over a canyon of tall buildings, and as a skyscraper when she punctuated its surface at the top and along the side with dark blue windows. Another blue block at the upper left oscillates between the solidity of building and the instability of light. To give the painting dynamism, the artist canted the central white mass to the right and ran two diagonal bars up its surface. They originate behind translucent pink spike and an opaque brown shaft at the lower edge and then climb the buildings, accentuating both the picture plane and the soaring height of New York skyscrapers. But the most unexpected feature of the particular painting was of the occasional flower floating over and around the skyscrapers. These flowers were not the traditional petunias, lilies, and irises that she had painted in her earlier years but the cloth and paper flowers she had discovered in northern New Mexico, flowers handmade by Hispanic women for decorative uses.

When she began to paint the city in 1925, Stieglitz warned her of the subject matter as being a “man’s topic” just as he cautioned her against taking on the demands of mural paintings. So when she painted her first ever large painting, a seven-foot-high skyscraper medley- she made it clear that this was different from how

the other dominant male artists portrayed scrapers, that this was an O’Keeffe rendition, different from the men’s work. The flowers were her personal signature, a self-conscious, autobiographical claim to a subject and to a scale of painting that had long been male territory.

In 1925, she created *New York Street with Moon*, which reflects her opinion that “one can’t paint New York as it is, but rather as it is felt.” (“Georgia O’Keeffe: New York Street with Moon”). She painted *The Shelton with Sunspots, N.Y* in 1926 that presents an optical illusion that she saw from where she stayed in Shelton. It was an abstract painting with all forms of geometric shapes as in with rectangles and circles- it unifies the building and the natural shade of the sunlight projections. She mostly painted what she saw from her window there. Her urban paintings were empty with people and crowded by engineered buildings, its shape, colours and shadows. They were often dark, tall and fascinating and different from how others painted them. They are portraits from the corners. “With the eyes of a modernist, she has simplified the internal articulation of these behemoths, thus emphasising their dark, vertical silhouettes against the deep blue sky,” states an art historian Eleanor Tufts. (Eleanor Tufts)

In 1930, she had begun to include such artificial flowers in her paintings of animal skulls. There, however, they seemed less discomposing, as both the bones and the flowers were from natural world and representative of south-western culture. Whereas, their appearance in a mural of skyscrapers, the flowers seem otherworldly, jarring, flirting with the bulky large buildings. The buildings are muscular, the flowers are delicate, the skyscrapers thrust up from the pavement and the flowers float on the plane as if in water. Including the flowers was a witty and a wilful act; their unexpectedness makes the viewers look more closely at the painting as a whole.

O'Keeffe had made her initial reputation as a painter of flowers, a theme the art critics said were feminine.

O'Keeffe produced more than twenty scenes of New York City between 1925 and 1930. The power and presence of the modern era are epitomized in the city's thrusting architecture. Beyond its formal features, O'Keeffe's murals share a dialogic intimacy with Alfred Stieglitz's final series of city photographs. She cropped and composed building masses in similar ways, looking at them from on high rather than at ground levels. O'Keeffe, not much bound to the opticality of the view camera, was less panoramic than Stieglitz and tightened the depth of field. In her characteristic way, she magnified the scale of the buildings, bringing them much closer to the picture plane.



Fig. 2

Title: Ram's Head, White Hollyhock-Hills

Created: 1935

Style: Precisionism



Genre: Landscape

Media: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 91.4 x 76.2 cm

O’Keeffe stopped portraying New York skyscrapers when she moved to Mexico in 1929. Despite all her magnificent portrayals of the New York manmade architectural erections, her main interest lied in nature. She emphasised her interest in the visual scenery of the state- in the forms of animal skulls and the south east landscapes. She explored through the deserts and mountains of Mexico. *Ram’s Head with Hollyhock (1935)*, encapsulates so much novelty while still maintaining with her classic aesthetic of magnifying and showing the beauty in small, natural details. *Ram’s Head with Hollyhock* announced the new freedom and inspiration; the design continues the formal play and the interest in evocative combinations of subjects. The enigmatic juxtaposition of skeletal, flora, and landscape images - a virtual catalogue of the subjects that had earlier garnered her acclaim - provoked new interest in O’Keeffe’s work. Ram’s head hovering above the desert is a transfiguration - as if the bone, divested of its physical usages - had suddenly learned of its own esoteric significance, had discovered the meaning of its own integration through the processes of disintegration, ascending to the sphere of its own reality, in the presence of skies that are not troubled, being accustomed to superior spectacles - and of hills that are ready to receive. Such an interpretation of the work again brings in the conviction of carnivalesque mesalliances of binary opposites, of life and death through the dead, decaying carcassed bones, contrasting the same with the vibrant colours of alive flowers.

“The rows of little hills under the Ram’s Head at Ghost Ranch must have been formed by thousands of years of wind and rain... I had looked out on the hills for weeks and painted them again and again—had climbed and ridden over them—so beautifully soft, so difficult... I had painted those hills from the car in bright sunlight

and had failed dismally but I could see them—farther away—from my window in the rain. So I tried again. They seemed right with the Ram’s Head.... I don’t remember where I picked up the head—or the hollyhock. Flowers were planted among the vegetables in the garden between the house and the hills and I probably picked the hollyhock one day as I walked past. My paintings sometimes grow by pieces from what is around.”

- O’Keeffe, 1976 (Robinson 489)

. After the death of Alfred Stieglitz, O’Keeffe’s interest reverted back once again to the architectural forms. *Ladder to the Moon*(1958), marked a shift in her work which may greatly be interpreted as a self portrait that depicted the transitory nature of her life. Others viewed it as a religious statement that showed a link between the earth and the cosmic forces above it.

“The images are all of transition: the ladder itself implies passage from one level to another, the moon is cut neatly in half by the bold slicing light, halfway between full and new; and the evening sky is in flux, still pale along the line of the horizon, shading into deep azure night at the top of the canvas.” (Robinson 498)

After 1950s she began to increase the size of most of her painting. Adding onto abstraction, in early 1960s, O’Keeffe painted an extensive collection of aerial cloudscapes inspired by her view from the windows of airplanes. In 1965, she created her biggest painting ever, *Sky above Clouds IV*, an eighty-by-twenty-four-foot portrait of clouds in abstract.

She expressed this most dominantly through her wardrobe. She spent much of her career, rallying against the persistent gender divide in the art world. Men were supposed as better artists, or at least more profitable. Although now she is very popular, in those days, there was nothing much she could do to excel and be part of

the mainstream players. This could explain her advocacy for masculine aesthetic fad through tailored suits, a bowler hat, tennis shoes and brogue; which seemed most outrageous during the beginning of the period. However, much of O’Keeffe’s inspirations came from feminist writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who advocated “social and domestic reform”. As is in Bakhtin’s account of carnivalesque, where he often uses the term “Grotesque realism”, drawing on the idea of grotesque. O’Keeffe’s style cuts through the boundaries between physical life and the fields of art, bringing bodily functions into the field of art. It often performs a kind of symbolic degradation aimed at bringing elevated phenomena ‘down to earth’ - to the material, bodily or sensuous level. Bakhtin believes that grotesque is counterposed to the classical idea of art as the pursuit of sublime.

O’Keeffe had painted most variedly in her career from modernism to abstractions and precisionism and charcoal paintings in a perception most alluring to her mind. She wanted people to see what she painted through her eyes and give a different angle of seeing nature. She denied all comforts of being known as a ‘female artist’; rather she wanted her to be known as an artist in all its normality. Being the most prominent of her generation, despite of her seemingly gendered paintings, she resisted sexist stereotypes and discrimination. She also portrayed a different path from the then existing norms of traditional paintings to modernism. Thus, carnivalesque approaches to the O’Keeffe paintings are subtle yet, inevitable. This is because Carnival is characterised by the spirit of possibilities, of renewal, of digression and tearing down of old forms and creations of new ones.

## Conclusion

The carnivalesque theory and the concept of carnival in the early ages upholding the popular culture and those that were considered lowbrow by the then dominating culture has been specifically produced in this study of O'Keeffe's paintings through Bhaktin's theory of carnivalesque. Without doubt, O'Keeffe was avant garde; her depictions of her own essence of womanhood, quite different from others of the age, especially women. To come into a male dominated industry and ace her style and make a mark of her own, had changed the whole idea of feminism and feministic art work. O'Keeffe's work has always been regarded as extensively female, from the first exhibition of her painting in Steiglitz's circle in 1920's to the very time now. The reference to the essentialist female discourse that has been attributed to her has evolved all through the years, taking a turn and tilting from the male centred discourse promoted by Alfred Stieglitz in 1920 which hosted O'Keeffe as a sexual yet passive agent which reflected how women had been seen during the period in western societies, to a discourse of subjective sexuality introduced by feminist theorists in the 1970's and which referred to O'Keeffe as a pioneering woman who claimed her full sexuality with no regard to the masculine-feminine, subject-object role traditionally attributed to woman , and introducing the idea of 'sexed subjectivity'. Her works on enlarged flower paintings were often studied in Freudian connotations attached to it. The alleged reference to womanhood is evident in every single brushstroke of O'Keeffe. Stieglitz claimed O'Keeffe's work in his words-"At last, a woman on paper!" after seeing her work in 1915.

She made her art canvases revolutionary and representative with abstraction and precisionism. Her life as well as her paintings, is a pure reflection of modern carnivalesque and subversion. She believed in equality and greatly advocated to be

known as an 'artist' rather than as a 'female artist'. She had quite different ideals than others of her age. She redefined the way people viewed artworks by female artists. She cut out the conventional methods of strokes. She was hesitant to imitate the works of her teachers. She felt what she painted should be how she saw something and should reflect her personality and her independent spirit and not how a particular thing has been represented by people over the years. Nancy and Jules Heller said, "The most remarkable thing about O'Keeffe was the audacity and uniqueness of her early work." (Jules Heller) During the time, there were very few artists who knew about abstraction. Even though her works show methods of surrealism and precisionism, her works are pure outcomes of her individuality.

O'Keeffe has mocked and satirized the male dominated society through her paintings, by choosing subject matters that were considered too privileged for a woman artist to represent and by subverting the general norms of accepted behaviour through emphasising female body as sane and her flesh as sacred. The idea of binary opposites are very well painted in her other works as well, that of death and life through the works of abstraction of animal skull coloured by flora, also the idea of manmade architecture and nature in her cityscapes; such subversive ideas are demonstrated in Bhaktin's carnivalesque.

So far theories of importance of Carnival and inversion in Cultural history, like those, most famously, of Bhaktin's *Rabelais and his World*, have been applied to modern Europe. They have been used to refer to the ways in which festive practices, broadsheets, and theatre turned hierarchy and authority and power upside down in all sorts of relations, from class, gender and age to aesthetics and cosmology. Bhaktin himself thought that the carnival spirit is indestructible in human society and that the tradition lives on after the Renaissance in the lower genres of Comedy, satire, fable, in

the novel, and in burlesque and the popular stage. O'Keefe's works has brought mass mob together in rereading and re inventing the suggestive meaning and metaphors applied to the profane and the sacrilegious imagery.

For Judy Chicago and others, O'Keefe's great achievement was that she created fearlessly candid though metaphoric representation of female body, one entirely different from the nudes painted by the male artists for a male audience. In considering a female body from a women's perspective, and openly exploring female sexuality, O'keeffe offered women artists a self empowering model of a female independence. However, such a mode of expression subverted the set high culture standards in the society, deviating from the patriarch of artistry and establishing norms of her own. Throughout her life, O'Keeffe remained unapologetically true to her own vision. Throughout her life and her works, she remained unapologetically true to her own vision. She still remains one of the most inevitable artist of the period who contributed much to American Modernism.



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