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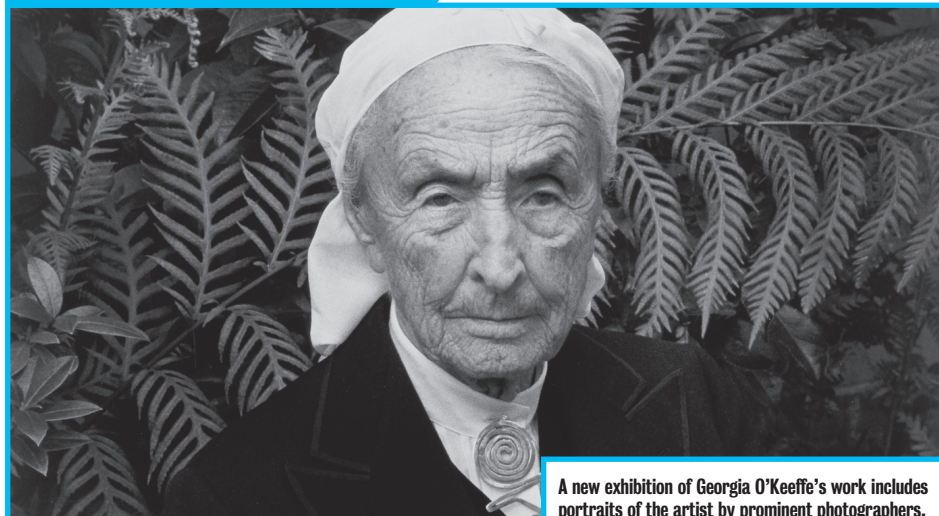


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## ART OF THE STATE

BY KRIS VAGNER



A new exhibition of Georgia O'Keeffe's work includes portraits of the artist by prominent photographers, including this one by Ansel Adams.  
PHOTO/COURTESY NEVADA MUSEUM OF ART

## Clarity

Georgia O'Keeffe

### Georgia O'Keeffe has an image problem.

The three best-known facts about her are: She was a 20th-century American art icon. She painted large, abstracted flowers. These flowers are often likened to female anatomy.

It's a perfectly reasonable comparison, O'Keeffe's flowers don't always look like "just flowers." But the problem is that the resemblance to body parts is pretty much all anyone ever talks about. A 2016 review in *The Guardian* put it perfectly: "There are few artists in history whose work is consistently reduced to the single question: flowers or vaginas?"

In a nutshell: O'Keeffe said she favored flowers for their natural beauty. Alfred Stieglitz—a prominent photographer and New York gallery owner whom O'Keeffe married in her late 30s—marketed the flowers as explorations of female sexuality. (His marketing strategy paid off in the long run. In 2014, O'Keeffe's "Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1" sold at auction for \$44.4 million, which is still the record for a woman artist.) In later decades, many artists held up O'Keeffe as a feminist role model, which she refuted until her death in 1986, at age 98, saying she'd rather be thought of as an "artist" than a "woman artist."

So, there's a massive disparity between the intentions that O'Keeffe wanted to convey and the ways that viewers, galleries and critics have read her work and her lifestyle—which included painting in solitude in New Mexico each summer for many years, while her influential husband remained in New York.

The exhibition *Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern*—while it doesn't flat-out ignore the "flowers or vaginas" question—downgrades it from main event to

minor point and instead poses a fresher, meatier set of questions around the ideas of identity construction and artists' intentions. The curator, Wanda M. Corn from the Brooklyn Museum, included artworks, artifacts and biographical notes that lead viewers straight to questions like: How much control do artists have over readings of their work? How do viewers' readings change over time? And to what extent can an artist successfully request that their work not be read through the lenses of a particular time period? (Despite O'Keeffe's request, it's somewhere between difficult and impossible to see her simply as "an artist," not as "an artist who competed with the heavyweights in a man's world—and a man's art world—like few before her.")

From a 1903 photo of O'Keeffe's high school class, we learn that she wore her hair in no-nonsense braids to proclaim her independence, while every other girl in her class sported the era's oversized bow and a high-volume pompadour. From a display of her handmade dresses—prim, high-collared, ankle-length, in all-black or off-white—we learn that she'd rather let her artwork speak for her than her clothing.

Boldly, *Living Modern* doesn't even include all that many of O'Keeffe's paintings—more than a dozen, which is enough to get a few telling snapshots—leaving room for portraits by other artists including Stieglitz, Ansel Adams, Yousef Karsh—one of the early 20th century's most celebrated portrait photographers—and even a diamond-dusted screenprint by Andy Warhol. This all adds up to an exhibition that reveres O'Keeffe deeply, but humanizes her in ways that it seems the entire 20th century just forgot to get around to. □

*Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern* is on exhibit through Oct. 20 at the Nevada Museum of Art, 160 W. Liberty St. A related talk, "Artist Kellee Morgado on Consumption and Waste in the Fashion Industry," is scheduled for noon-1 p.m. on Sept. 20. Visit [www.nevadaart.org](http://www.nevadaart.org).

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