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Review of *Art of West Texas Women: A Celebration* by  
Kippira D. Hopper and Laurie J. Churchill

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*Art of West Texas Women: A Celebration.* By Kippra D. Hopper and Laurie J. Churchill. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2010. xx + 196 pp. Color illustrations, index. \$29.95 paper.

“[In Texas] the development of . . . the visual arts was initiated, encouraged and promoted by women.” James Chillman, “Houston,” *Texas Painting & Sculpture: 20th Century* (1971).

Texas historians, acknowledging women as art pioneers in Texas, rely on the old saw that while men were settling the state, women led the charge for cultural pursuits. Groups of women—trained artists among them—began organizing art activities in all parts of the state in the early 1880s on the heels of settlement, recognizing the importance of an appreciation of aesthetics and beauty to the development of a significant culture. Since most public school teachers in Texas were female, teaching art and bringing art to students were natural developments; women also founded Texas’s first public art museums.

While scholars have acknowledged women’s contributions to the areas of art appreciation and art education in Texas, the accomplishments and importance of Texas’s women artists are rarely addressed. Old patterns persist, however, and in recent historic Texas art exhibitions, women artists continue to be discussed as late comers or second-tier members of the artistic community. Experimentation became almost *de rigeur* for women artists as they fought their way out from under the shadows of their male counterparts. Ironically, many were taken more seriously in their own time than in our “enlightened” present.

Although West Texas was one of the last areas of the state “settled” by Anglos, it was not entirely devoid of artists during the first half of the twentieth century. Amarillo, Canyon, El Paso, Abilene, Lubbock, Albany, and San Angelo all had established art communities by 1925.

Still, despite having worked at West Texas State Normal College at Canyon for less than two years at a time in her life when she could either teach art or work in commercial art, Georgia O’Keeffe continues to be co-opted by every discussion of art making in West Texas, and especially—and emphatically—in

discussions of artists in West Texas who happen to be female. In *Art of West Texas Women: A Celebration*, the deification and coattail riding of O'Keeffe continues. Moreover, as far as their connection to the Great Plains is concerned, many of the artists included, based solely on their work, could be working in New York, Seattle, or Timbuktu.

The veneration of O'Keeffe for other agendas has continued since her first exhibitions in New York in the teens, through attempts to hijack her work for a feminist agenda in such works as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and exhibitions on women artists in the 1970s. Today, any female who happens to pick up a paint brush or chisel invokes the Goddess Georgia or is written about in "O'Keeffe-anesse."

Meanwhile, Barbara Buhler Lynes writes in her excellent essay "Georgia O'Keeffe and Feminism: A Problem of Position," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 1992), that in 1977 when O'Keeffe was asked to be interviewed about a book on women artists, she stated it was "a silly topic. Write about women. Or write about artists. I don't see how they're connected."

Echoing O'Keeffe (but hopefully not riding her coattails), my questions about this book are:

1. "Why?"

2. "Why these artists?" [Future Akins, Doris Alexander, Toni Arnett, Linda Cullum, Tina Fuentes, Robin Dru Germany, Marilyn Grisham, Lahib Jaddo, Anna Jaquez, Dale Jenssen, Patricia Kisor, Abby Levine, Tracy Lynch, Pat Maines,

Deborah Milosevich, Maria Almeida Natividad, Collie Ryan, Mary Solomon, Sara Waters, and Amy Winton]

3. "What do these artists have to do with the Great Plains?"

My answers are:

1. I don't know.

2. I don't know.

3. Geography.

According to Lynes, "O'Keeffe was intolerant of all thinking that differentiated between men and women on the basis of sex; and this provided a broad basis for her objection to sex-based opinions about what she expressed as a 'woman artist.' She objected to their isolation of the work of women artists and the examination of their works as 'women's art.'" When she stated in 1977 that she thought the topic of a book about women artists was "silly," that she did not see a connection between the term *woman* and the term *artist*, she meant exactly what she said. As a result of her determination not to be limited by what she felt the linking of these terms implied about the nature of her expression, she had spent most of her career attempting to assert that she was not a woman artist, she was an artist.

Thank you, O'Keeffe.

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