

5-2016

## The Artistic Legacy of Georgia O'Keeffe

Michelle L. Knutson  
*Dominican University*

<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2016.ART.ST.01>

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### Recommended Citation

Knutson, Michelle L., "The Artistic Legacy of Georgia O'Keeffe" (2016). *Senior Theses*. 51.  
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2016.ART.ST.01>

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The Artistic Legacy of Georgia O'Keeffe

by

Michelle L. Knutson

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Art History Program

Dominican University of California

May 2, 2016

## Dedication

I would like to thank my mother, Sheri Knutson, and my husband, Joshua Ebersole, for their encouragement and inspiration and Dr. Leslie Ross for her assistance and patience.

## Abstract

The work of American artist, Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), was considered to be unique and revolutionary in her own time, but she ultimately achieved a prominent position in the history of art. The enduring inspiration of this important artist is demonstrated by an investigation of key artistic motifs as well as her legacy via the discussion of artists who have been influenced by her: Alfred Stieglitz, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and the author, Michelle L. Knutson.

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# The Artistic Legacy of Georgia O’Keeffe

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# The Artistic Legacy of Georgia O’Keeffe

*I found I could say things with color and shapes that  
I couldn’t say any other way – things I had no words for...*

*Georgia O’Keeffe*

## I. Introduction

Within the history of art, there have been relatively few women artists who rose to prominence within their own lifetimes. The work of Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) was considered to be unique and revolutionary in her own time, but she ultimately achieved a prominent position in the history of art as one of America’s most important modern artists. Her personal and pleasing style made her popular, while the fervent promotion of her work by her husband, Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), made her successful. Using modernist techniques of flattening of space and subject matter, O’Keeffe emphasized the harmonious relationship of color, line, and shape in order to express her deeply personal vision. The enduring inspiration of O’Keeffe is demonstrated by her life, work, and artistic legacy as evidenced by artists who have been influenced by her: specifically, Alfred Stieglitz, Arthur Dove, Mardsen Hartley, and the author, Michelle L. Knutson.

Georgia O’Keeffe developed key visual motifs that appear continually throughout her career. These various subjects, such as clouds and sky, buildings and architecture, and the southwest landscape, also have inspired other artists influenced by her work and career. Alfred

Stieglitz, her husband, a prominent gallery owner and key figure in the New York art scene, was a photographer of clouds and buildings. Arthur Dove, an artist who was also part of Stieglitz's circle of artists and friends, was both inspired by and a major influence of O'Keeffe with his distinctly American Modern style. The artist Marsden Hartley was so inspired by O'Keeffe's work in New Mexico that he, too, visited and depicted the Southwest landscape. Even today, O'Keeffe continues to inspire contemporary artists through her work and life.

Georgia O'Keeffe was inspired by the new art form of photography. As in photography, O'Keeffe reduces her subject matter to the basic elements of line, color, and shape. "The dominant forms in her large-scale flower paintings exist in a highly compressed, nondelineated space. They are precisely contoured yet highly abstracted, as if seen through a close-up lens, and often they are studies in tonal gradation."<sup>1</sup> Yet, unlike early photography, intense and bright color was essential to her painting.

Sensual, but not sexual (as is so often the misconception), her work is organic, natural, sensory — perhaps the basis for Stieglitz's promotion of her work as uniquely feminine — a purely woman's point of view. Though O'Keeffe seemed to just tolerate this idea that she was painting "as a woman," the framing served well to promote her flower paintings: intimate, intensely colorful, and sensuous depictions of the very essence of each blossom.

Georgia O'Keeffe was born on November 15, 1887 on a dairy farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. The second of seven children, she was always considered a dreamer and creative spirit and determined at an early age to become an artist. She pursued her dream with passion and, after high school, attended art school in Chicago and New York.

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<sup>1</sup> Lynes, Barbara Buhler, and Jonathan Weinberg. *Shared Intelligence: American Painting and the Photograph*. Berkeley: U of California, 2011, 81.



Unfortunately, after art school, financially strained and disenchanted with formal artistic tradition bound in realistic representation, she temporarily abandoned artistic endeavors. It was when she encountered the ideas of Arthur Wesley Dow (through the teachings of Alon Belmont whom she met at the University of Virginia in 1912<sup>2</sup>) that she was inspired to create once again. “To Dow, artistic expression was, above all a *personal* expression that was best realized by thinking of art as a visual harmony achieved not through imitation but through design — a synthesis of line, color, and the Japanese conception of *notan* (tonal contrasts).”<sup>3</sup> This concept, involving the balance of light and dark visual elements, is evident in O’Keeffe’s work.

Coupled with her increasing awareness of modernism, O’Keeffe began to experiment in a more personal artistic expression, using pastel, charcoal, and watercolor. “Many of O’Keeffe’s charcoal drawings subsequently reveal Dow’s influence in their sensuous evocations of an undulating line or an occasional geometric form that dispenses with specific reference to nature or the body. Dow had been averse to the copying of an object or figure, aiming instead for an abstract distillation of its primary traits.”<sup>4</sup>

Using elements of design, each of her works is a creation of her original and intimate perspective. “And it was the intensely personal nature of these works that appealed to Alfred Stieglitz, the internationally known photographer and impresario of modern art, and gave him a basis for promoting O’Keeffe’s art as archetypically American.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Balken, Debra Bricker. *Dove/O’Keeffe: Circles of Influence*. Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2009, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Fine, Ruth, Georgia O’Keeffe, Barbara Buhler Lynes, Elizabeth Glassman, and Judith C. Walsh. *O’Keeffe on Paper*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2000, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Balken, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Fine, 43.

The photographer and gallery owner, Alfred Stieglitz, was also O’Keeffe’s lover, husband, and creative partner during her early years. In 1917, so enthralled was he with her work, he gave her her first solo exhibition at his New York gallery. After their marriage in 1924, though they continued to work independently on their own projects, they spent a significant amount of time in upstate New York near Lake George, a place to which O’Keeffe felt intimately connected: “For most of the 1920s they would spend their summers there, and the place became their primary connection to nature and, by extension, the American soil, until O’Keeffe began her annual visits to New Mexico in 1929.”<sup>6</sup>

After Stieglitz’s death in 1946, O’Keeffe moved to her spiritual home of New Mexico full time. She was drawn to the fierce beauty, expansive sky, and sparse desert landscape of the West. Having visited New Mexico frequently since 1929, she had set up residence at Ghost Ranch and Abiquiú, near Santa Fe. “O’Keeffe’s paintings were now inspired by desert themes, including bleached bones, desert landscape, churches and buildings — but she continuously observed abstraction in nature.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. Artistic Themes and Motifs

Even in her early work, experimenting with pastel, charcoal, and watercolor, Georgia O’Keeffe observed and reduced forms in nature, a process she had come to understand through the philosophy of Arthur Dow. Using nature as her subject matter, O’Keeffe spilled her emotional life into her paintings. She was particularly drawn to depicting the sky and clouds.

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<sup>6</sup> Hole, Heather, and Marsden Hartley. *Marsden Hartley and the West: The Search for an American Modernism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007, 61

<sup>7</sup> O’Keeffe, Georgia, Richard Marshall, Yvonne Scott, and Achille Bonito Oliva. *Georgia O’Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction*. Milano, Italy: Skira, 2007, 15.

In *From the Lake, No. 1*, 1924 (Figure 1), it is difficult to make out where the sky or land or water begin or end; all become undulating lines and layers of color. The colors range from deep blues and grays, to hints of yellow and white, to turquoise and aqua. The painting moves despite its flattened forms. It evokes a tumultuous state of mind, a darkness, and a depth.

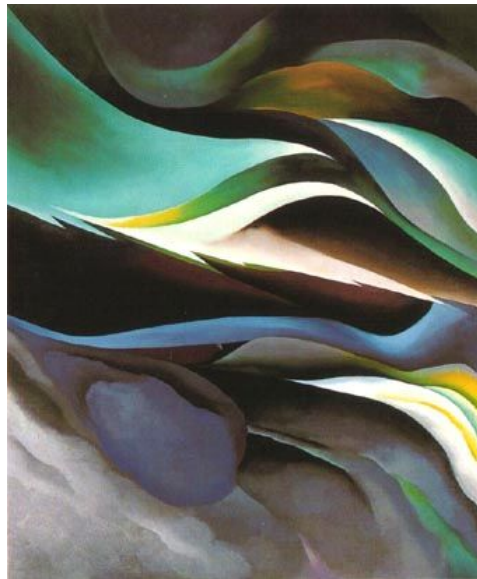


Figure 1: *From the Lake, No. 1*, 1924 by Georgia O'Keeffe

Later in her career, after the dramatic and new experience of air travel, O'Keeffe began a series of sky paintings from the altered perspective of above the clouds. In *Above the Clouds, I*, 1962-63 (Figure 2), her use of color and line flattened the skyscape into simple shapes. The clouds in the foreground look like flat cotton balls that recede into space, a light pink line of color at the horizon blending into the blue of the sky. These paintings feel gentle and calm; they hold a transcendent quality, as if O'Keeffe felt truly at peace.



Figure 2: *Above the Clouds I*, 1962-63 by Georgia O'Keeffe

It is safe to assume the Georgia O'Keeffe painted what she saw, whatever was in front of her. So when she was living in New York City, she was moved to depict the monumental structures of the skyscrapers and when she was living in New Mexico, she was inspired by the humble adobe structures of the native people who inhabited the region.



Figure 3: *City Night*, 1926 by Georgia O'Keeffe

While living in New York, O’Keeffe could not help but be inspired by the mammoth shapes of the skyscrapers and tall buildings. Her work, *City Night*, 1926 (Figure 3) is similar to Arthur Dove’s painting *Silver Tanks and Moon*, 1930 (Figure 9) in its composition, but O’Keeffe’s lines are more defined and clean. Though both paintings depict the full moon shining between large structures, the later O’Keeffe work is more closely related to the high contrast and monochromatic photography, like the work of her husband, Alfred Steiglitz. However, unlike the Dove painting, O’Keeffe’s work feels stifled and claustrophobic, perhaps a reaction to life in New York City. Once she discovered the New Mexico landscape, the emotionality of her architectural paintings changed. She felt more serene and calm in that raw and free Southwestern environment and her paintings reveal that.



Figure 4: *Patio with Black Door*, 1955 by Georgia O’Keeffe

She would paint many variations of her patio view in her Abiquiú home in New Mexico, usually with a window or door a dark shape against the flat adobe wall. Like *Patio with Black Door*, 1955 (Figure 4), the images are simple and evoke a calm atmosphere, suggesting

O’Keeffe’s newfound serenity in her new place. In this image, the building fills the frame but does not crowd it. The colors are soft and light pastels except for the dark shape of the window, which is small on the space of wall. The image feels meditative and serene.

In addition to depicting the unique architecture of the Southwest, O’Keeffe created many paintings of the singular landscape. For example, *Red Rust Hills*, 1930 (Figure 6) displays dynamic colors and lines which distills the subject matter, almost to the point of abstraction. It “...appears to be bold, abstract, horizontal gestures in brown, black and red - until the title reveals the subject. The painting displays rounded undulating forms of layered hills, divided by shifts in light and darkness that confuse reading of flatness or depth, and illustrates the artist’s’ personal perspective of the New Mexico hills”<sup>8</sup>



Figure 6: *Rust Red Hills*, 1930 by Georgia O’Keeffe

It is not a representational painting of the landscape, but it is an expression of O’Keeffe’s experience within that landscape. She felt intimately connected to the natural world here and

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<sup>8</sup> O’Keeffe, 15-16.

would paint the same dynamic scenes again and again, as the light, atmosphere, and weather changed.

### III. Artists Inspired and Influenced by O’Keeffe

#### 1. Alfred Stieglitz

Alfred Stieglitz created his own series of cloud and sky images entitled *Equivalents* from 1924 to 1931 (Figure 7). He said: “Clouds and their relationship to the rest of the world, and clouds for themselves, interested me, and clouds which were most difficult to photograph — nearly impossible... I always watched clouds. Studied them... I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in forty years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life... clouds were there for everyone...free.”<sup>9</sup> He captured his own inner life in these images. “He said, My cloud photographs are equivalents of my most profound life experience, my basic philosophy of life.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Normann, Dorothy, Ulrike Bischoff, and Jacques Bosser. *Alfred Stieglitz*. New-York: Aperture Foundation, 1997, 10-12.

<sup>10</sup> Normann, 12

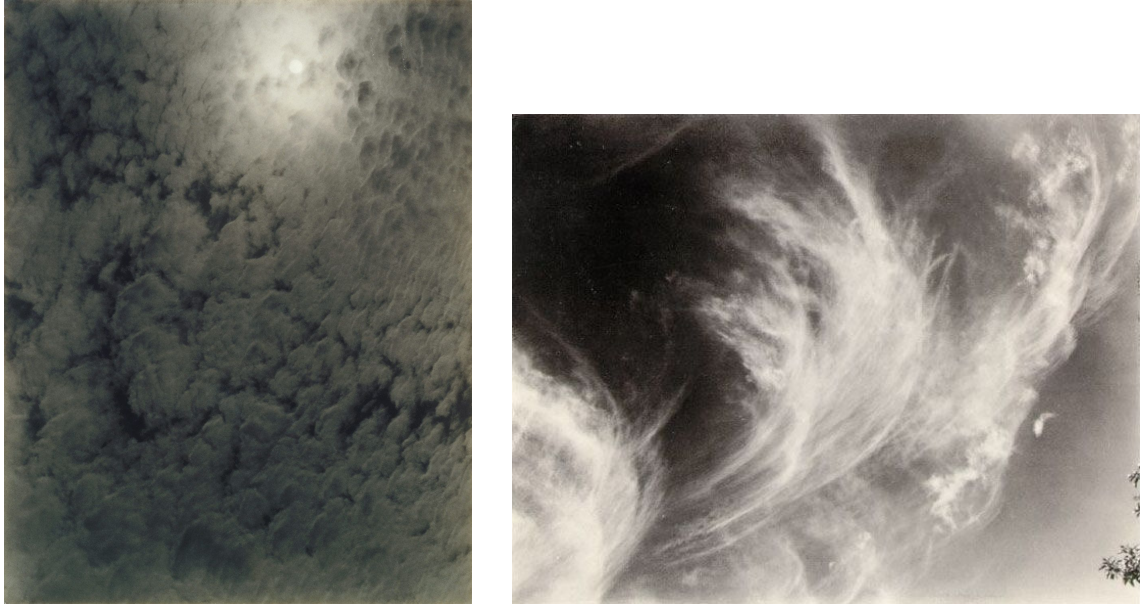


Figure 7: *Equivalents series*, 1924-1931 by Alfred Stieglitz

In the first image in Figure 7, the sun shines through a great expanse of quilted sky, only a small circle at the top of the frame, and the light filters through the scattered clouds. The fact of the sun in the photograph does not diminish the darkness hidden behind the ripples of fleecy mackerel sky. There is a feeling of anxiety revealed in the repetitious shapes, of something impending; rain is coming.

In the second image, the clouds feel free as they lift across the frame like feathers. The dark gray in the upper left corner contrasts with the wings of white clouds. The photograph moves from left to right, across the frame, creating a feeling of optimism and light. Though a branch of tree peeks in the lower right corner, the clouds are not representational, but abstracted lines across the palette of heavens.

Stieglitz was a prolific artist, integral to the New York art scene, as well as the creation of photography as a “new” art form. Like O’Keeffe, he also depicted the immediate world around him: New York city buildings and architecture. *New York from the Shelton*, 1933-35 (Figure 8) is



a high contrast image of tall buildings in New York City that reveals the stable and firm emotional state of the artist. The lower third of the frame is anchored by a dark rectangle of shadow, giving the image a solid foundation from which the tall shapes of skyscrapers rise.

O’Keeffe felt less comfortable in the big city, as is evident in her depictions of New York. For example, in *City Night*, 1926 (Figure 3), the skyscrapers rise up but lack a solid foundation. Their shapes create diagonal lines that lean towards each other and feel almost to meet out of frame, creating a crowded atmosphere, as if the viewer will be swallowed up by the city. In her painting, the light of the moon shines on one building in the background, creating a bright shape to look towards, a sign of hope amid the claustrophobic scene.



Figure 8: *New York from the Shelton*, 1933-35 by Alfred Stieglitz

## 2. Arthur Dove

The artist Arthur Dove (1880-1946) was a friend and colleague of Georgia O’Keeffe, as well as a member of the Stieglitz circle, a tight knit group of creative intellectuals seeking to define and capture the new American modernism. The relationship between O’Keeffe and Dove was one of mutual admiration and inspiration. “The way you see nature depends on whatever has influenced your way of seeing,” [O’Keeffe] asserted. “I think it was Arthur Dove who affected my start, who helped me to find something of my own.”<sup>11</sup>

Though Arthur Dove’s influence can be seen in O’Keeffe’s early career, as she was learning about European Modernism, her influence on his work can be seen in his later endeavors. Their pairing revealed “a more intuitive, sensual approach to nature, an approach that would be branded as uniquely American.”<sup>12</sup>

“Of the significant contributors to the American watercolor movement, the artist who would come to be artistically and personally closest to Dove in the late 1910s and 1920s was Georgia O’Keeffe. Like Dove, O’Keeffe’s first mature expressions were works on paper, in her case charcoals and watercolors rather than pastels. She used the languid flow of watercolor, each color seemingly applied in a single brushstroke, to create images that seem to evoke nature through their own organic existence and resist categorization under one of the European modern styles.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Balken, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Balken, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Kirschner, Melanie, and Arthur Garfield Dove. *Arthur Dove: Watercolors and Pastels*. New York: George Braziller, 1998, 26.

There are many works between the two artists that seem to correspond and it is obvious they each drew inspiration from the other. “O’Keeffe’s *City Night*, 1926 (Figure 3) and Dove’s *Silver Tanks and Moon*, 1930 (Figure 9), for example, make use of the same compositional format, with their phallic thrust of architectural forms illuminated by the glow of a full moon.”<sup>14</sup> However, as discussed earlier, O’Keeffe’s painting feels tighter and more crowded while the brilliance of Dove’s moon and the lighter colors he uses give the painting a more optimistic emotion.



Figure 9: *Silver Tanks and Moon*, 1930 by Arthur Dove

Dove’s work *Sea Gull Motive* (sometimes called *Sea Thunder* or *The Wave*), 1928 (Figure 10) shows O’Keeffe’s influence on Dove. Reminiscent of both her close-up flower paintings and her abstract sky paintings: “...in which the sensual folds of petals and/or feathers are cast as rippling, abstract patterns.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Balken, 63

<sup>15</sup> Balken, 75.



Figure 10: *Sea Gull Motive (Sea Thunder or The Wave)*, 1928 by Arthur Dove

### 3. Marsden Hartley

The artist Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), who was also associated with the Stieglitz circle of artists, was inspired by Georgia O’Keeffe to visit and paint the New Mexico landscape. The circle was driven by an idea that “the spiritual essence of a new American modernism could be found in the American soil.”<sup>16</sup> He first visited in 1918 and produced more representational pastels as he directly witnessed this new landscape.

Eventually, for Hartley, the act of painting the New Mexico landscape became an exercise in memory. While he was inspired by the land while visiting, it was the act of remembering the distinct scenery that drove his creativity. “Between 1918 and 1924, Hartley painted the New Mexico landscape again and again, while living first in New Mexico, then in New York, and finally in Europe. As Hartley moved farther and farther away from New Mexico itself, his work became increasingly characterized by melancholy and yearning for the ever

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<sup>16</sup> Hole, 1.

unreachable, already missed encounter with the landscape.”<sup>17</sup> In *Landscape, New Mexico, 1923* (Figure 11), the melancholy atmosphere is pervasive. Where O’Keeffe’s landscapes of the same subject matter (see Figure 6, for example) are vibrant and full of bright color, Hartley’s are more subdued, exhibiting his personal views of the history of the land. “Where Hartley’s painting of New Mexico culminated in complex and painful dislocation of the recollections, O’Keeffe’s New Mexico works were rooted in her experience of the landscape.”<sup>18</sup>



Figure 11: *Landscape, New Mexico, 1923* by Marsden Hartley

Another difference between the New Mexico landscape paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe and Marsden Hartley is that he often included evidence of inhabitants in his landscapes, where she usually did not. “Often dwarfed by the mountains, the houses, too, seem to stand in for missing people, in this case, they remind us of their invisible inhabitants.”<sup>19</sup> O’Keeffe’s view of the landscape is always more personal and directly influenced by her inner emotional life.

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<sup>17</sup> Hole, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Hole, 143

<sup>19</sup> Hole, 107.

4. Michelle L. Knutson

There are several photos of me as a young child sucking on a lens caps, but it was not until 1991 that I took my first formal photography class while attending high school and then continued my studies in college. Initially inspired primarily by black and white photography, I have been experimenting recently with color photography, especially as the medium has become more reliant on digital technology. (I admit I primarily use my iphone camera because it always happens to be the camera I have with me.) Like Georgia O’Keeffe, I am inspired by my inner emotional life reflected on my immediate surroundings; I have a strong sense of place. Much of my work focuses on the place where I grew up, in Marin County, California, and the natural beauty that abounds.

In April of 2015, I visited Santa Fe, New Mexico and the surrounding area, including Taos, Abiquiú, and Ghost Ranch. While visiting the ancient Taos Pueblo, I was drawn to the dark rectangles and squares of the doors and windows on the adobe buildings, as well as the bright white clouds against the luminous blue sky. For example, in *Taos Pueblo, New Mexico*, 2015 (Figure 12), the brilliant blue of the sky, marked with streaks of white cloud, in the top of the frame is contrasted with the subtle and stable diagonals of the the simple buildings in the lower half of the frame. Like many of O’Keeffe’s paintings, there are no people in the picture, yet it depicts the evidence of their inhabitation. The image is more about the shapes and lines than the realistic portrayal of the scene: the distillation of the subject matter to the primary forms and colors.



Figure 12: *Taos Pueblo, New Mexico*, 2015 by Michelle L. Knutson

The life that Georgia O’Keeffe created for herself in New Mexico is as inspiring as her artwork. She prided herself on keeping things simple: “My house in Abiquiú is pretty empty; only what I need is in it, I like walls empty. I’ve only left up two Arthur Doves, some African sculpture and a little of my own stuff.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Balken, 68.



Figure 13: *New Mexico Landscape*, 2015 by Michelle L. Knutson

After visiting the home and studio of Georgia O’Keeffe, I was inspired to make the image, *New Mexico Landscape*, 2015, while driving through the desert to her other main New Mexico residence, Ghost Ranch. The New Mexico landscape is indeed inspiring, with layers of color and texture that are even evident in this black and white image. In editing this image, I heightened the contrast, thus highlighting the dark darks and light whites of the landscape, interspersed with variations of grays. The effect gives the image an intensity that demonstrates the emotion provoked by the gorgeous landscape. Like O’Keeffe’s paintings of sky, most of the frame is taken up by layers of clouds. Here, they recede toward the background mountain which delineates the bottom portion of the frame, merging into the layers of gray.





Figure 14: *From Above*, 2015 by Michelle L. Knutson

Flying home from New Mexico, I was inspired again by the cloud paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe. In *From Above* (Figure 14), I emphasized the fractured light and geometric shapes below, thus flattening the frame into an abstract composition. There are circular shapes in the lower right portion of the frame that feel out of place and give the image a certain mystery. The viewer is forced to question what they see. The subject matter is distilled into mere shapes and lines.

#### IV. Conclusion

When an artist can provoke the creative spirit of another artist, this spark, this connection is partly responsible for the progression of art as we know it. When an artist, such as Georgia O'Keeffe, continues to provide this inspiration long after they are gone, their legacy becomes a sort of legend. This is partly evident by the fact that sales of O'Keeffe paintings can range in the millions of dollars even today. Though her flowers are her most familiar and famous works, her enduring influence lies in her sky, landscape, and architectural motifs which give us a true glimpse into her philosophy and life.

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