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Author: Susan Reid

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REVIEW ESSAY

**TWO MODERNISTS AT THE TATE:
GEORGIA O'KEEFFE AND PAUL NASH**

SUSAN REID

The work of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) spans much of the twentieth century and has become a staple of US galleries, but not a single item is ordinarily on display in Europe. O'Keeffe herself did not travel to Europe until late in life and instead she developed a distinctively American style of modernism. The Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition at Tate Modern (6 July to 30 October 2016) presented the largest retrospective of her work outside the USA and a rare opportunity on this side of the Atlantic to survey the career of this iconic American artist. Expectations were high – or perhaps hyped, depending on your point of view. As Mark Hudson noted in his review, leadingly titled 'Is Georgia O'Keeffe overrated?':

The name Georgia O'Keeffe comes with a big, all-American fanfare. The "mother of American modernism" and the world's most-expensive woman artist, this pioneering feminist painter is a true American icon, as famous for her lifestyle in the rugged New Mexican desert, as for the large paintings of flowers that are her best-known works.¹

Adrian Searle frankly accused Tate Modern of "cashing in" with a blockbuster that "seeks to show there is more to Georgia O'Keeffe than anodyne prints, signature aprons and sexual stereotypes – but her own gorgeous, awkward art compounds the clichés".² However, with the critics seemingly divided along gender lines, Jackie Wullschlager found the retrospective "superb": "America's challenge to Europe, painting's answer to photography, female

identity asserted against the male gaze: several major strands of 20th-century art converge uniquely in the work and life of Georgia O'Keeffe".³

O'Keeffe staunchly resisted the label of "woman artist" that dogged her career since its beginning in 1916, when Alfred Stieglitz greeted the discovery of her early charcoal drawings with the fateful words: "finally a woman on paper". "Men put me down as the best woman painter", O'Keeffe later protested: "I think I'm one of the best painters".⁴ Accordingly, in the 1960s she rebuffed overtures from feminists who saw her first and foremost as a woman rather than an artist. Aptly, then, and more sensitively, a tribute from Christine Taylor Patten (quoted in the exhibition catalogue) is addressed "from one American artist to another":

Georgia O' Keeffe was one of the ways to be a woman and an artist, and it seems important to see her life as a mold, a pattern that determines form, defining a way to live. The circumstances of her life are not the example. It is the abstracting – as with the flowers, the bones, the simplicity – that should be the example, the abstract continuity of unseen patterns and clues, culled in perhaps unrecognizable form at first, but revealing when examined, a simple clarity, wholeness ... Her example is as simple as the evidence: it is that she cared intensely about what she did each moment and, most important, that she allowed that caring to show.⁵

Even in the first rooms of the exhibition – before the paintings of flowers and bones at its centre and amidst photographs by Stieglitz that threaten to assert O'Keeffe's life over her work – the abstraction of form, and what Patten describes as "caring", shines through. In *Red and Orange Streak* (1919), Texan plains stretch towards a red sweep demarcating the horizon, while a vertical swathe of orange in the foreground represents the pervasive sound of cattle lowing. O'Keeffe's interest in synaesthesia (inspired by Arthur Dove and Wassily Kandinsky) is also evident in early oil

paintings, notably *Music – Pink and Blue No. 1* (1918) and *Blue and Green Music* (1919–21), which remind us that O’Keeffe was also a talented violinist, who made a choice between art and music. These paintings were hung in counterpoint to works like *Grey Lines with Black, Blue and Yellow* (1923), which have often attracted sexualised interpretations that O’Keeffe resisted: a caption quoted her as saying, “When people read erotic symbols into my paintings, they’re really talking about their own affairs”. The inclusion of nude photographs of O’Keeffe by Stieglitz seemed to play to erotic associations in both the work and the life, even while her own *A Celebration* (1924), from the year of O’Keeffe’s marriage to Stieglitz, sheds different light on their artistic union. This painting of cloud formations responds to Stieglitz’s photographs in the series *Equivalents* (1927), but also prefigures her late interest in aerial views from planes depicted in two series that were perhaps the surprise of the show and which underline her career as a lifelong response to landscape.

Careful contextualisation of the early work showed O’Keeffe moving between celebratory cityscapes of New York in the period before the Wall Street Crash in 1929 (also in dialogue with work by Stieglitz and his circle) and rural subjects in upstate Lake George that signal her development away from the city as a focus of American modernity. And so we arrive at the iconic flowers and still lifes of the 1920s and early 1930s. *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1* (1932), which sold for \$44.4 million at Sotheby’s in 2014 (breaking previous records for a female artist at auction), is the inevitable centre-piece of the show.⁶ Ironically, we have become so accustomed to such images that it is difficult to approach them anew as attempts to make the familiar strange. But a quote from O’Keeffe reminds us that: “Nobody sees a flower – really – it is so small – we haven’t time – and to see takes time ... Well – I made you take time to look”. Less monumental in size, but equally intense, are the still lifes – *Alligator Pear* (1923), *Two Figs* (1923) and *The Eggplant* (1924) – that also “make you take time to look”. A remarkably similar effect is achieved by D. H. Lawrence’s

poems, of course, which capture what he memorably described as “the essential act of attention, the essential poetic and vital act” (*IR* 115). Indeed, the resonances between Lawrence and O’Keeffe were palpable in much of her work in this exhibition, though acknowledged only in the catalogue’s reprint of a 1922 *Vanity Fair* article by Paul Rosenfeld:

[O’Keeffe] is one of those persons of the hour who, like Lawrence, show[s] an insight into the facts of life of an order well nigh intenser than we have known. She is one of those who seem the forerunners of a more biologically evolved humanity ... Her consciousness is akin to something that one feels stirring blindly and anguishedly in the newest men and women all through the land. And in that there lies the cause of her high importance.⁷

O’Keeffe’s *Lawrence Tree*, well-known to Lawrence enthusiasts, was not on show here, despite an emphasis on O’Keeffe’s love of trees. (Beside *Autumn Traces – The Maple* [1924], there was a quote from Waldo Frank: “O’Keeffe is very like a tree ... If a tree moves, you don’t notice it. And when you find this woman moving through the windy whirlwind that ever rages around Alfred Stieglitz you have the effect of silence”.) But displayed among other exhibits from O’Keeffe’s time in Taos with Mabel Dodge Luhan (including a wonderful photograph of Tony Lujan by Ansel Adams) was *Horse’s Skull with Pink Rose* (1931): this, as Lee M. Jenkins reminds us in *The American Lawrence* (2015), is O’Keeffe’s “visual response to Lawrence’s word-picture, in ‘St. Mawr’, of ‘the bones strewing’ the desert landscape”: “Bones of horses struck by lightning, bones of dead cattle, skulls of goats with little horns: bleached, unburied bones” (*SM* 150).⁸ At the end of her persuasive study of Lawrence’s participation in American literary modernism, Jenkins thus hints at Lawrence’s influence on O’Keeffe’s depictions of bones against a desert

landscape that would become the iconic images of American modernist art.

We can also turn to Jenkins for further explanation of the first edition copy of Lawrence's *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine* (1925) exhibited here with its inscription by Stieglitz to O'Keeffe: "When Dreams and Realities are One, The Miracle has happened / It is about 10 years ago Anita Pollitzer brought me some 'drawings' / To Georgia O'Keeffe from '291' / December 20, 1925". We know from Lawrence's letters that he had arranged for a copy of his book to be sent to Stieglitz, and that he also told Stieglitz of his wish to see "the cloud 'snapshots', your equivalents" as well as O'Keeffe and "some of her things" (5L 319). Stieglitz had first written to Lawrence to express his enthusiasm about *Studies in Classic American Literature* (4L 499); a book which became a battleground for the critical scene in the United States, as Jenkins relates in her recent study and which, along with *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and his "Southwestern trilogy" of short fiction, would establish his credentials as an American modernist.⁹

Despite its powerful effect on him, Lawrence moved on from New Mexico, while O'Keeffe settled there for her final decades. During the later 1930s and 1940s, she deepened her exploration of the distinctive landscape of the South West in her paintings of the cliffs near the Ghost Ranch and what she called the "White Place" and "Black Place". Like Lawrence, O'Keeffe had attended Native American ceremonial dances with Tony Lujan and she maintained a keen interest in indigenous Native American cultures, as witnessed by her paintings of "kachinas" (wood or clay figures of spirit beings). Even as she moved further towards abstraction in the 1950s, she was influenced by views through apertures, like those in skulls and pelvis bones, and her late aerial views of rivers often resemble the tree branches she collected in her studio. There is, then, a surprising degree of continuity combined with development in O'Keeffe's examination of the American landscape beyond the Hudson from every angle: from the magnified close-ups of flowers and fruits and bones, to vast horizons and aerial representations.

As the O'Keeffe exhibition drew to a close, along the Thames at Tate Britain, the Paul Nash exhibition opened (26 October 2016 – 5 July 2017). Unlike O'Keeffe, Paul Nash (1889–1946) is a staple of UK galleries: Tate has a significant holding of his work, supplemented for this major retrospective (the first since 1975) by loans mainly from across the UK. Regarded as a major figure in British surrealism, Nash is presented here as playing an important role in debates about the relationship of international modernism between the wars, alongside Herbert Read and others. And although we may question whether in fact he veered away from modernism, as Mark Hudson notes in his review of “one of the year’s essential exhibitions”: “Nash, however, asked questions about whether it is possible to be ‘modern and British’ – about whether this country should be looking inward or outward – that feel strikingly relevant today”.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Nash remains much less well-known outside the UK, in some ways, representing a British parallel to the American modernism of O'Keeffe, which it seems is more highly regarded on home soil. And there are other surprising resonances between their unpeopled landscapes and preoccupation with genius loci. At the centre of the exhibition, in a room called ‘The Life of the Inanimate Object’, we learn that Nash collected items – flints, bones and driftwood – that reminded him of particular landscapes, rather as O'Keeffe did in New Mexico.¹¹ And their late works seem to have arrived in a similar aerial space, albeit by different routes, with Paul Nash writing in 1945 that: “Everything I am thinking of and imagining now tends towards objects poised, floating or propelled through the middle and upper air, earth, the spaces of the skies and the miraculous cloudscapes that constantly form, change and disappear”. But, of course, they treated their subjects very differently: O'Keeffe was never a surrealist, while Nash was strongly influenced by European artists like Giorgio de Chirico and was closely involved in the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936. Also, Nash was deeply affected by his experiences of the First World War that continued to haunt his landscapes until

the Second World War brought a different imagery of aeroplanes and aerial threat.

The exhibition provides little information about Nash's early career, emphasising instead the early influence of artist-poets Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Blake visible in dream-like super/natural scenes. But it would seem important to know that although Nash spent only a year at the Slade School of Art (1910–11), where he clashed with Henry Tonks, he formed important friendships and connections, with a circle that included Ben Nicholson, Stanley Spencer, Mark Gertler, William Roberts, Christopher R. W. Nevinson, Edward Wadsworth and Dora Carrington (Nash was one of the first to fall in love with her). Only Nicholson and Wadsworth appear later in this exhibition, as comrades in Unit One, a touring exhibition of 1934–5 that also included sculpture by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Instead the story of the Slade group is told in David Boyd Haycock's very readable book *Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War* (2009) and by the exhibition he subsequently curated at the Dulwich Picture Gallery (12 June – 22 September 2013): 'Nash, Nevinson, Spencer, Gertler, Carrington, Bomberg: A Crisis of Brilliance'.¹² Lawrence, of course, is part of this history because of his relationships with Gertler and other friends of Nash, including Dorothy Brett and Eddie Marsh, and although there is no evidence that Lawrence and Nash ever met, for a time, their circles of cultural influence significantly overlapped.

Despite his abrupt departure from the Slade, Nash was able to establish a reputation in shows in 1912 and 1913, sometimes with his brother John Nash (also absent from this exhibition at Tate Britain), attracting the patronage of Marsh and becoming a member of the London Group in 1914.¹³ Early in the war, Nash enlisted in the Artists' Rifles, with duties protecting London, but in 1916 he was called up for officer training and sent to the Western Front. A fall in a trench and a broken rib saved him from an engagement at the Ypres Salient in which the majority of his unit was killed. In

late 1917, Nash returned to Ypres as an official war artist, writing to his wife Margaret:

It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious. I am a messenger who will bring back word from men fighting to those who want the war to last forever. Feeble, inarticulate will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth and may it burn their lousy souls.

In fact, his first-world-war paintings – including the savagely ironic *We Are Making a New World* (1918) and monumental *Menin Gate* (1919), both on loan from the Imperial War Museum – are powerful representations of violently ravaged landscapes, in which dead and stunted trees suggest the damaged bodies and corpses of soldiers who are often eerily absent from these scenes. After the war, Nash suffered from a breakdown and the effects of the war seem to persist in his landscapes of the 1920s, which depict bleak and embattled sea defences at Dymchurch or severely pruned and felled trees in work like *Landscape at Iden* (1929).

This exhibition also emphasises Nash's relationship with words; as a young poet, as an illustrator (for example of Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*, beloved by modernist writers including E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf), and as a prolific writer about the possibilities of modern art. Although he experimented with surrealism, Nash did not consider himself a surrealist, since he associated the latter with a specific movement in Paris; surrealism, on the other hand, he regarded as belonging "to all and to England". His most distinctive works, such as *Landscape from a Dream* (1936–8), explore Freudian ideas about the unconscious within recognisable English settings. His work as a second-world-war artist also draws on surrealist ideas of metamorphosis, most famously in *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)* (1940–1), his transformation of a mass of crashed planes at the Cowley Dump near Oxford into a sea of dead metal creatures. As Nash neared death, the damaged and damaging planes he had repeatedly photographed and painted during the war

morphed into airborne flowers as precursors of death, such as *Flight of the Magnolia* (1944) and *Solstice of the Sunflower* (1945). The English landscape remained a continuous feature of his work, but always with strong visionary and mythological elements.

Together, then, these two exhibitions of work from across the great divide of the Atlantic raise many questions about the art of modernism and, particularly, whether art that is rooted in specific landscapes can remain modern and speak across cultures and times. In the cases of O’Keeffe and Nash, some art critics and gallery curators have their reservations, although for me an enduring interest arises from the personal responses of these artists to particular moments, in particular places, and, above all, in their ability to make us look again at what we thought we knew. As O’Keeffe said, in another echo of Lawrence, “Making your unknown known is the most important thing and keeping the unknown always beyond you”.¹⁴

¹ Mark Hudson, ‘Is Georgia O’Keeffe Overrated?’, *Telegraph*, 4 July 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/the-reality-of-georgia-okeeffes-work-does-not-live-up-to-the-leg>>.

² Adrian Searle, ‘Georgia O’Keeffe at Tate Modern review – one long, strange trip’, *Guardian*, 4 July 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/04/georgia-o-keeffe-review-tate-modern-retrospective>>.

³ Jackie Wullschlager, ‘Georgia O’Keeffe at Tate Modern’, *Financial Times*, 7 July 2016 <<https://www.ft.com/content/4fe1b58e-429c-11e6-b22f-79eb4891c97d>>. See also Karen Wright’s review ‘An extraordinary show, long overdue’ in the *Independent*, 6 July 2016 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/georgia-okeeffe-tate-modern-review-an-extraordinary-show-long-overdue-a7122306.html>>; and Olivia Laing, ‘The Wild Beauty of Georgia O’Keeffe’, *Guardian*, 1 July 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/01/georgia-okeeffe-tate-modern-exhibition-wild-beauty>>.

⁴ Unless otherwise stated quotations are from captions at the Tate exhibitions.

⁵ Quoted in Griselda Pollock, 'Seeing O'Keeffe Seeing', in *Georgia O'Keeffe: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Tanya Barson (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 102–38, 103.

⁶ 'American Icon: Georgia O'Keeffe's Jimson Weed, White Flower No. 1' <<http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/videos/2014/11/american-icon-georgia-okeeffe-jimson-weed.html>>.

⁷ Paul Rosenfeld, 'The Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe', *Vanity Fair*, no. 19, October 1922, in Barson, ed., *Georgia O'Keeffe: Exhibition Catalogue*, 138–42, 142. Of course, even before his arrival in America in 1922, Lawrence was already well-known to members of the Stieglitz circle, including Waldo Frank, who published 'The Thimble' and 'The Mortal Coil' in *Seven Arts* in 1917 (3L 142).

⁸ Lee M. Jenkins, *The American Lawrence* (Gainesville, FL: U of Florida P, 2015), 108–9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 83. The three stories that Jenkins discusses as a "Southwestern trilogy" are *St. Mawr*, 'The Princess' and 'The Woman Who Rode Away'.

¹⁰ Mark Hudson, 'Paul Nash at Tate Britain is one of the year's essential exhibitions – review', *Telegraph*, 24 October 2016, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/paul-nash-tate-britain-review-one-of-the-years-essential-exhibit/amp/>>.

¹¹ In this room, Nash's work is shown alongside work by Eileen Agar, another practitioner of surrealism, with whom he had an affair. On Agar, see A. S. Byatt, 'Angel of Anarchy', in the *Guardian*, 27 November 2004: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/nov/27/art.asbyatt>>.

¹² David Boyd Haycock, *Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War* (London: Old Street Publishing, 2009). For a review of the resulting exhibition, see Alistair Cooke in the *Telegraph*, 20 June 2013: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10110971/A-Crisis-of-Brilliance-1908-1922-Dulwich-Picture-Gallery-review.html>>.

¹³ For details of the history of the London Group of artists, which still exists, see <<http://www.thelondongroup.com/artists.php>>.

¹⁴ Quoted in Laing, 'The Wild Beauty of Georgia O'Keeffe'.