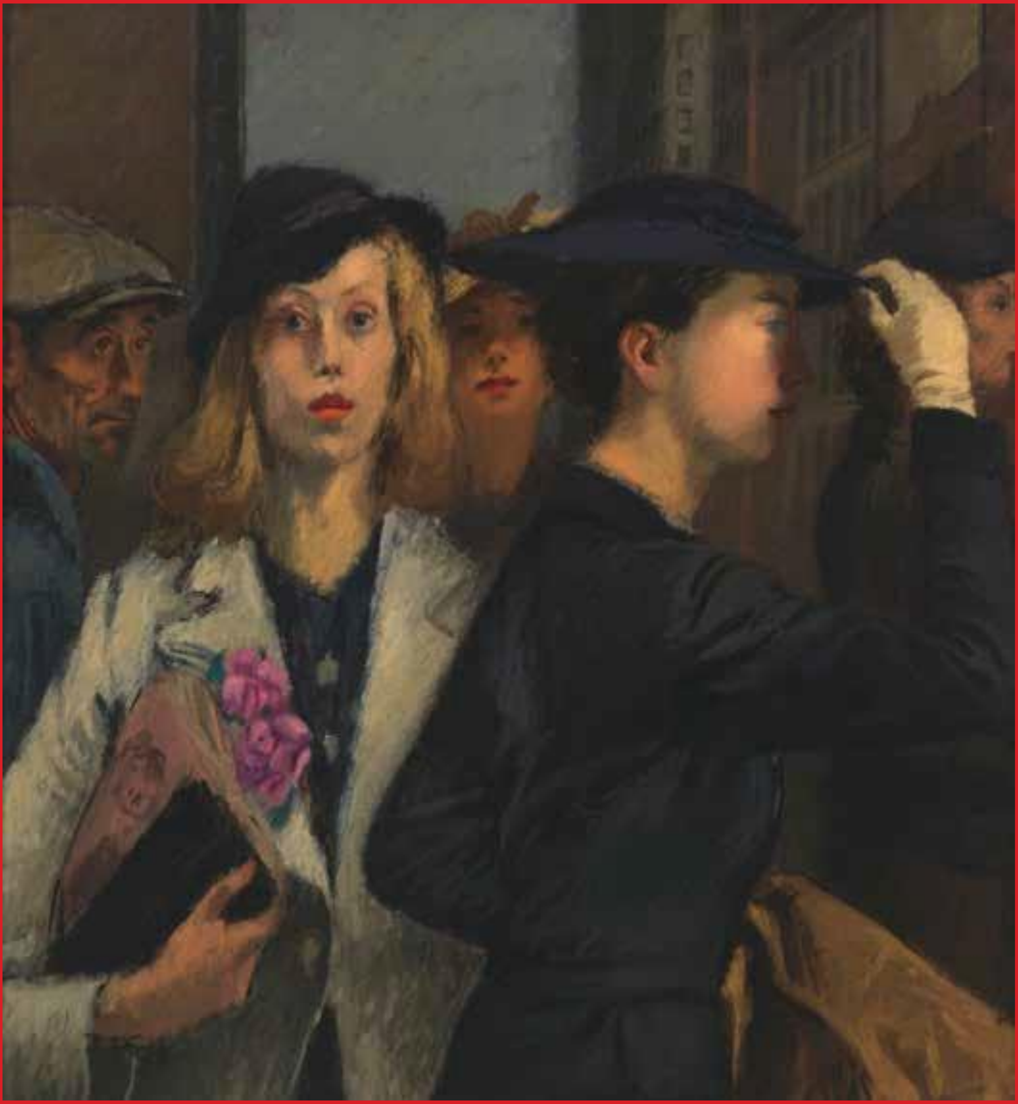
ALIVE in SHAPE and COLOR



Office Girls by Raphael Soyer

ALIVE in SHAPE and COLOR

17 PAINTINGS BY GREAT ARTISTS AND THE STORIES THEY INSPIRED

edited by

lawrence block

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ALIVE IN SHAPE AND COLOR

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD: BEFORE WE BEGIN . . .
Lawrence Block vii

SAFETY RULES
Jill D. Block 1

PIERRE, LUCIEN, AND ME
Lee Child 19

GIRL WITH A FAN
Nicholas Christopher 29

THE THIRD PANEL
Michael Connelly 47

A SIGNIFICANT FIND
Jeffery Deaver 59

CHARLIE THE BARBER
Joe R. Lansdale 77

AFTER GEORGIA O'KEEFFE'S FLOWER
Gail Levin 99

AMPURDAN
Warren Moore 109

ORANGE IS FOR ANGUISH, BLUE FOR INSANITY
David Morrell 119

LES BEAUX JOURS
Joyce Carol Oates 153

TRUTH COMES OUT OF HER WELL TO SHAME MANKIND
Thomas Pluck 175

THE GREAT WAVE
S. J. Rozan 197

THINKERS
Kristine Kathryn Rusch 207

GASLIGHT
Jonathan Santlofer 235

BLOOD IN THE SUN
Justin Scott 257

THE BIG TOWN
Sarah Weinman 273

LOOKING FOR DAVID
Lawrence Block 291

PERMISSIONS 309

foreword

BEFORE WE BEGIN . . .

Here, Gentle Reader, is the foreword as I initially wrote it:

Months before the December publication of *In Sunlight or in Shadow: Stories Inspired by the Paintings of Edward Hopper*, it had already become clear that the book was destined for success. The pantheon of contributors had turned in a stunning array of stories, and the huge in-house enthusiasm at Pegasus Books guaranteed the book would be well published.

So what would I do for an encore?

I considered—and quickly ruled out—putting together the mixture as before, another anthology of Hopper-inspired stories. The man left us a large body of work, and one could point to any number of paintings as likely to evoke stories as the ones already chosen, but it was clear to me that one trip to that well was enough.

So what other artist might stand in for Edward Hopper in a second volume?

No end of names came up, and not one of them struck me as promising. In each instance, one could imagine a story flowing out of a painting by the proposed artist. Andrew Wyeth, Piet Mondrian, Thomas Hart Benton, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko—any of these masters, figurative or abstract, might inspire a single intriguing story. But a whole book's worth?

I couldn't see it.

And then the penny dropped. Perhaps a whole roomful of artists could do what a single artist could not.

Seventeen writers producing seventeen stories based on seventeen paintings—each by a different artist.

Alive in Shape and Color.

I didn't like the title quite as much as *In Sunlight or in Shadow*—and still don't, I have to admit. But it would do to get us started.

I took a deep breath, poured myself a cup of coffee, and began drafting an email to potential contributors.

An invitation to contribute to an anthology is an honor, right?

Well, of course it is. And yet I find myself thinking of the visitor who somehow aroused the ire of the local citizenry, some of whom had expressed their displeasure by tarring and feathering the fellow and riding him out of town on a rail.

"But for the honor of the occasion," he reported, "I'd have preferred leaving town in a more conventional fashion."

The honor of an anthology invitation brings its own tar and feathers. One has to write something, and the cash return for one's time and effort is essentially token payment. It's always been clear to me that to ask someone for a story is to ask that person for a favor.

Sometimes, of course, it all redounds to the writer's benefit. When I look back at the stories I've written for other people's anthologies, I have much to be grateful for. A couple of stories about a cheerfully homicidal young woman, all written almost grudgingly for friends of mine compiling anthologies, led to a novel, *Getting Off*. A short story I'd long ago promised for a collection of private eye stories revived Matthew Scudder when I'd assumed I was done writing about him. (The story, "By the Dawn's Early Light," was my first sale to *Playboy*, won me my first Edgar Award, grew into *When the Sacred Ginmill Closes*, and led over the years to a eight more short stories and a dozen more novels about Mr. Scudder.)

So I can't say I regret those anthology invitations I've received. Still, I issue them diffidently, knowing that they're always, to some extent, an imposition.

In this instance, I knew where to start. I invited all sixteen *ISOIS* contributors. They'd been a pleasure to work with, and their stories were superb—and I could only hope that at least a few of them would re-up for another tour of duty. Megan Abbott had to pass, explaining she had way too much work on her plate. Stephen King, who'd surprised me by letting his love for Hopper lure him into *ISOIS*—and whose story won him an Edgar nomination—was able to resist this time around. Robert Olen Butler liked the idea of *Alive in Shape and Color* (which I think I'll call *AISAC* for the rest of this introduction); he chose an artist and a painting, then had to bow out when he learned his publisher had committed him to a lengthy book tour that ate up all his time.

But everybody else accepted.

Now I have to tell you that this flat-out astonished me. I sent out a few more invitations, quickly accepted by David Morrell, Thomas Pluck, S. J. Rozan, and Sarah Weinman. And they accepted too.

All the stories for *ISOIS* were new, specifically written for the book, and *AISAC* was similarly conceived. But David Morrell responded to my invitation by stating that he not only liked the premise but that he'd written the story thirty years ago. He sent along "Orange Is for Anguish, Blue for Insanity," and it wasn't hard to see what he meant. (It was just as easy to see why it had won a Bram Stoker Award when it was published.)

So the possibility exists that a few of you may have read David's story before. I don't think you'll mind reading it again.

And you could think of it as a bonus, because we'd have eighteen stories this time around, one more than *ISOIS*. I didn't see that as a problem, and neither did the good folks at Pegasus.

Eighteen stories? Um, better make that sixteen.

One thing to know about writing is that it doesn't always work out the way you'd hoped. It's a rare anthology to which a writer doesn't fail to deliver a promised story.

This happened with *ISOIS*. One writer picked a painting and agreed to write a story, and an onslaught of personal problems made work of any sort out of the question. By the time he let us know his story was just not going to happen, we'd already acquired reproduction rights to his chosen painting, *Cape Cod Morning*. If we couldn't have the story, at least we could have the painting—and used it as a bonus frontispiece for the book.

This time around, Craig Ferguson found himself unable to deliver. He'd picked a Picasso painting, but the story never came, and his own schedule grew impossibly demanding, with the added time commitment of a new show on SiriusXM radio. He apologized profusely and said he hope I could understand.

I understood all too well.

Because I too found myself unable to deliver a story.

I'd picked a painting very early on, around the time I was readying my letters of invitation. My wife and I were at a portrait show at the Whitney in New York City, and an oil by Raphael Soyer stopped me in my tracks. I'd never seen it before, knew next to nothing about the artist, and figured it was as perfect a source of fictional inspiration as anything of Hopper's.

Eventually I got around a thousand words written. But I didn't like what I'd done, nor did I see where to go with it.

Now, I sold my first story in 1957, so I've been doing this for sixty years. And I've been getting the message lately that it may be something I can't do anymore. A few years ago it seemed to me that I might be ready to stop writing novels, and while I've turned out a book or two since then, I don't expect to do another. There have been a few short stories and novellas in recent years, and there may be more in what time I have left—but there may be not.

And that's okay.

If I'd promised the Soyer-inspired story for someone else's anthology, I'd have long since sent regrets and apologies. But it seemed unpardonable for me to bow out of my own book, and so I banged my head against that particular wall longer than I needed to. Eventually it dawned on me that a book with such fine stories by so distinguished a list of contributors could make its way in the world without a story of mine.

And just because I'd failed to deliver the story didn't mean you'd have to make do without the painting. Even as *Cape Cod Morning* functioned admirably as the frontispiece illustration for *In Sunlight or in Shadow*, so does *The Office Girls* serve beautifully in that capacity in *Alive in Shape and Color*. And, as before, I'll extend an invitation to y'all. Feel free to come up with a story of your own based on Raphael Soyer's evocative painting. Dream it up—and, if you're so inclined, write it down.

But don't send it to me. I'm done here.

And that would have been that, but for an email from Warren Moore, whose Salvador Dali–inspired story is one of the special treats awaiting you. He reminded me that I had in fact published a story twenty years ago that fit AISAC*'s requirements quite comfortably. "Looking for David" grew out of my own teenage exposure to a copy of Michelangelo's statue in Buffalo's Delaware Park, the recollection triggered by the sight of the original on a 1995 visit to Florence. Matthew Scudder's in Florence with his wife, Elaine, when a chance encounter with the principal in an old case fills him in on what Paul Harvey used to call "the end of the story"—a story that begins in Buffalo, plays out in New York, and winds up on the banks of the Arno.*

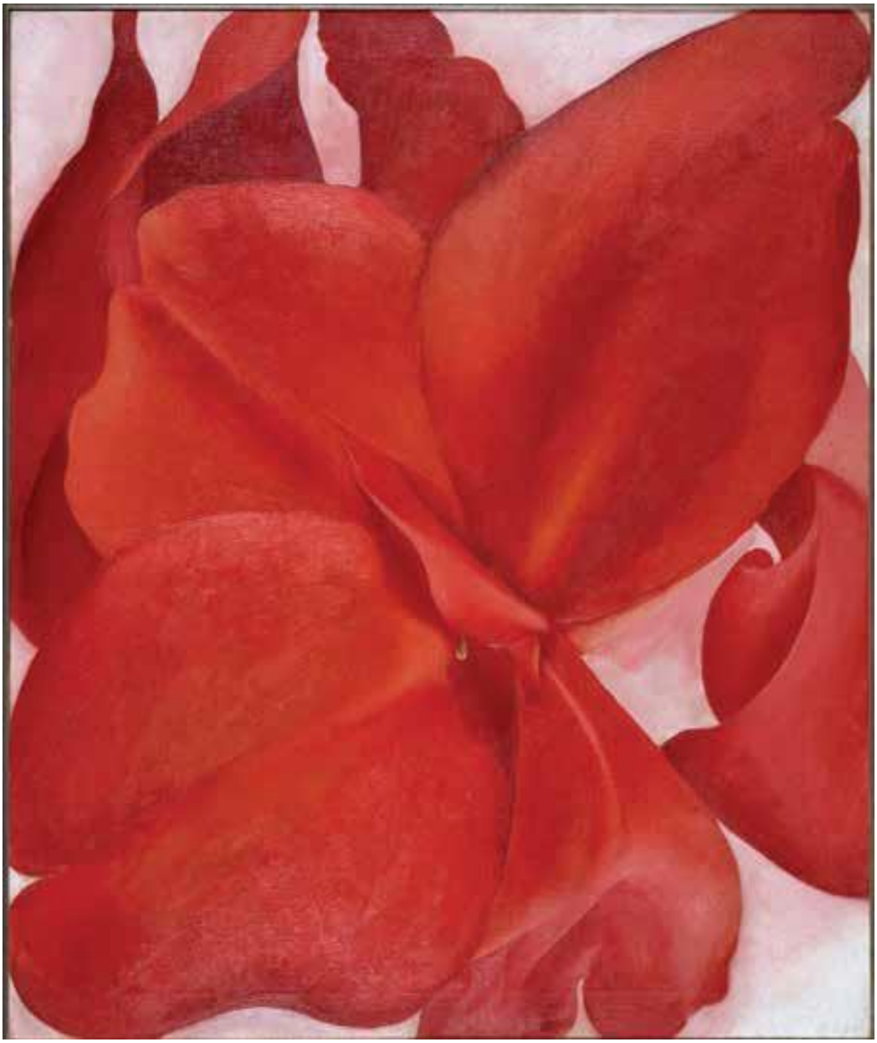
A perfect fit for the book, but could AISAC *include a second previously published story? I could argue the case either way, so I handed off the decision to Claiborne Hancock at Pegasus, who didn't hesitate to vote aye. And so* AISAC *has seventeen stories after all, with Michelangelo's* David *joining Rodin's* The Thinker *in the sculpture gallery.*

But we've kept Raphael Soyer's The Office Girls *as a frontispiece, a bonus painting that may inspire you as it didn't quite manage to inspire me.*

—Lawrence Block

GAIL LEVIN *writes artists' biographies, art history, and fiction; curates exhibitions; and exhibits her own art. A native of Atlanta, Georgia, Levin is now distinguished professor of art history, American studies, and women's studies at the Graduate Center and Baruch College of the City University of New York.*

She is the acknowledged authority on the American realist painter Edward Hopper. In 2007, the Wall Street Journal *chose her* Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography *(1995, second expanded edition, 2007), as one of the five best portrayals of artists' lives, going back in its selections to 1931. Focused on women artists, the subjects of her other biographies include Judy Chicago and Lee Krasner.*



Red Cannas by Georgia O'Keeffe

After Georgia O'Keeffe's Flower

BY GAIL LEVIN

I am so excited that Georgia O'Keeffe has finally agreed to meet with me! Getting her to come around wasn't easy. At first she wouldn't even reply to my letters. I kept at it. You know, persisted. Finally, I reached her secretary on the phone. When I did get word from O'Keeffe, she complained that there had been too many interviewers over the years. When I asked, she admitted that most of them were male journalists.

As far as I could tell from digging through files of old clippings, there's been a veritable avalanche of requests. I can see why some of the results put her off. Take Henry Tyrrell, of the *Christian Science Monitor*. Already in 1917, he embroidered: "Miss O'Keeffe looks within herself and draws with unconscious naiveté what purports to be the innermost unfolding of a girl's being, like the germinating of a flower . . ." She was having none of that. She could have taken offense at being called naive. Does her resentment still fester? Does memory make her so tough: “Why should I do this?” O’Keeffe had asked me when I requested an interview. I said, “Because I am a woman. I don’t see art the way those men do.”

I wrote to her how the paintings in her retrospective made me see in a whole new way. They moved me from the abstract geometry that I had studied in art school to finding subjects in nature. I started to see the world differently. Everywhere I looked, I began finding metaphors for the feminine.

As I changed my own work to bring out the feminine in nature, I went on to apply my discoveries to writing about O’Keeffe. I published this piece as a review of her recent show in the magazine *Womansplace*. Not wanting to alarm her, I haven’t mentioned that I share the journal’s feminist perspective, which some, I suppose, might call “radical.” We want to change the art world and the larger society. We seek to eradicate male patriarchy and supremacy. We women must have our share of power.

To my mind, O’Keeffe’s art and career embodies that power. When I saw for myself the strength of female forms in her large painted flowers, like *Red Canna* from the early 1920s, I knew one of these flowers would be perfect for the cover of my book on women artists, soon to go to press. The publisher warned me that O’Keeffe has so far withheld permission to reproduce her copyrighted images in all such contexts—those where the book is not entirely about her. But I am determined to change her mind. I need to get her to lend me a color transparency of one of her flower paintings and to give me permission to reproduce it.

I suppose you could see me as a revolutionary on a noble mission. I must convince O’Keeffe that her work has been transformative for my whole generation. I intend to get rid of that old saw that sneered at ladies painting flowers. “Lady Flower Painters” were only fit to decorate silk fans, sniffed Charles Dickens. Jo Hopper, married to that unreconstructed Victorian, Edward, used to complain how he disparaged her, O’Keeffe, and women artists in general as “Lady Flower Painters.” Against that stereotype, O’Keeffe’s flowers look epic. They must speak for and to women everywhere. But how am I going to get her to realize that? It’s a small victory that she has at least agreed to meet with me.

Now that I am about to speak with her face-to-face for the first time, I am feeling a bit anxious. In the course of setting up this meeting, I picked up hints from others that she might not be so agreeable. I suspect that convincing

O’Keeffe to give me permission to reproduce one of her flowers in my book will take some effort. But I consider these paintings to be some of the most important by anyone—ever! They prefigure feminist art being done today. I mean my own and my contemporaries’.

So, mulling over all this in my mind, I finally arrive, after driving for two days alone in the sun, all the way from Venice Beach in Southern California, across the Arizona dessert, to Abiquiu, in northern New Mexico. Here O’Keeffe lives below the spectacular Sangre de Christo mountain range. It does not take much imagination to see that these colorful rocky forms that she paints in her landscapes already look like female forms and contours. Even the rosy tone of the weathered stone cliffs and buttes evokes flesh.

I can barely contain my excitement. At the door, I meet O’Keeffe’s assistant, who seems a bit too stern. She takes my bag and tersely informs me, “No cameras, no recorders allowed.”

I try to put aside the assistant’s gruff manners so that I can approach O’Keeffe with the sense of awe that I feel. I see her as a role model for all women artists. I hope that she is a harbinger of my own future success. I see palpable strength both in her pictures and in her career in an art world where men still call the shots. Now eighty-six, O’Keeffe appears confident. More than half a century has passed since she first exhibited her drawings, then her watercolors, and oil paintings in New York. By now, she knows that she has earned the acclaim she has received. As praise builds, it confirms her greatness as the artist of her generation.

I am thrilled but surprised to see O’Keeffe in person: her skin is lined with fine wrinkles. While her hair is mostly gray, pulled back and pinned up in a severe bun, her brows are still thick and dark. She wraps her fragile thin frame in elegant black. Both her face and her body echo her austere surroundings, plain white adobe walls. She does not even display her own art. O’Keeffe seems to emanate a sense of control over this spartan environment. The effect, perhaps knowingly orchestrated, is intimidating.

O’Keeffe greets me, asking, “Good afternoon. How was your trip?”

I respond, “Miss O’Keeffe, thank you so much for seeing me. It is a great honor to meet you. You have so inspired me as an artist that I have brought some photographs of my own paintings to share with you.”

O'Keeffe's reply stuns me: "I cannot see them. My sight is too weak now. I am told that I have a specific kind of eye problem, and there is nothing that anyone can do for it. That's what the people that think they know tell me. So I just decided to get on with it. I am making ceramic sculpture now. It won't bother you that I cannot see so much, will it?"

Taken aback, almost embarrassed, I reply: "I did not know. I am so sorry. I love your art. Your paintings have so inspired me."

"Virginia Goldfarb. Where did you get that name?" O'Keeffe changes the subject. "Is it like so many of these other women who have been taking geographic place names for themselves? Wanda Westcoast, Judy Chicago, Lita Albuquerque, or even that man, Robert Indiana?"

"No. My parents named me Virginia after my mother's mother, named Virginia. I was actually born and raised in San Francisco."

Seeming to relax a bit, O'Keeffe elaborates, "My own given name was bestowed at birth. I wasn't born anywhere near Georgia, but in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. I don't like gimmicky names. If one's work is strong, such names are unnecessary."

The sting of skepticism lingers. I sense that I need to do more to soothe her doubts, but what? Winning her over feels like a struggle. "Miss O'Keeffe, I saw your show at the Whitney Museum and loved it! You are a role model for feminist artists of my generation."

"What do you mean by 'feminist artists'?" O'Keeffe snaps. I sense that she does not want to be reduced to anybody's feminist. She seems to doubt that I or any other feminists understand what she faced and how she coped.

"I am referring to women who make art about the experience of being female; women who call attention to the issues of gender and gender inequality."

To this, O'Keeffe, replies, "I supported women's suffrage. I belonged to the National Women's Party. I believe in women making their own living."

"I am also talking about women who have responded to new books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Feminism encourages women to take pride and full ownership of their bodies. Such awareness informs feminist art."

At this O'Keeffe bristles, "I hear from a friend that one of these 'feminists' paid a lot of money to take out a full-page ad in a prominent art magazine. She wore only a pair of sunglasses and posed nude, holding a large dildo against her body, trying to attract attention to herself and her art."

I know the artist whom she is talking about. Her antics created a sensation but did nothing for feminism. Before I can figure out what to say, O’Keeffe elaborates, “Some have had the nerve to compare the aggressive sexuality of her pose to the photographs that Stieglitz took of me and included in a show of his photography. This is absurd! I was in an intimate relationship with Stieglitz! I don’t want to see that transformed into a cheap template for this young woman’s narcissistic strategy to promote herself. Stieglitz himself insisted, ‘Each time I photograph I make love.’”

About that I wish that she had said more. I want to ask O’Keeffe about her relationship with Stieglitz. I am curious about how she managed to juggle his roles as the art dealer that he was for her and others, as a photographer, but then as her lover, and then her husband. Better not to go there. After all, Stieglitz, who was more than two decades older than O’Keeffe, has been dead for more than a quarter of a century. Besides, some say that he cheated on her. She is surely not going to want to relive the love affair, the marriage, his flirts with others, betrayals, her abrupt departure alone for New Mexico.

I’ve read that she puts great value on Stieglitz’s own art—his photography. I’m sure that Stieglitz’s close focus on photographing O’Keeffe—her art, her face, her hands, and her nude body—changed the trajectory of her life and career. I decide to ask her about that instead: “You were the subject of some of his most famous work. Was that difficult?”

“Stieglitz’s idea of a portrait was not just one picture,” explains O’Keeffe. “His dream was to start with a child at birth . . . As a portrait it would be a photographic diary. It took a lot of patience—posing for him. He would go on shooting me for hours and hours. I had to learn to hold still for what seemed like an eternity.”

What that makes me wonder, I don’t think I’d better inquire, so I change the subject. “Miss O’Keeffe,” I venture, “you remember being in the Museum of Modern Art’s second show in 1929? They called it ‘Nineteen Living Americans,’ but you were the only woman. How did that feel?”

“Yes I recall. You might know that Alfred Barr was the curator, but not that he didn’t pick the artists for that show. The museum’s trustees actually voted. You might think that nineteen is an odd number, but that’s all that they could agree upon—not fifteen or even twenty. Some of the trustees, like Duncan Phillips, for example, already collected my work and that of other artists chosen. Each trustee wanted to promote *his* own artists. Thanks to Stieglitz most of them knew my work well. Some of them collected it."

"So the trustees did not know or like work by other women?"

"Maybe not well enough. Maybe not in the same way."

"Miss O'Keeffe," I ask boldly, about to read her a critic's comment on her work. "I am sure that you remember Paul Rosenfeld? He once described your work as 'spiritualizing' your 'sex.' He wrote: 'Her art is gloriously female. Her great painful and ecstatic climaxes make us at last to know something the man has always wanted to know . . . [t]he organs that differentiate the sex speak.'"

"This is false! Paul's words were often overly reductive. I hear that feminists are now making similar silly claims. One supposedly says that her art—her abstract flowers—represent 'active vaginal forms,' while she dismisses my earlier flower forms as 'passive.' News of this young woman trying to promote her art by putting mine down irritates me. What irks most is her cheeky attempt to usurp my place in history, all the while making use of what I invented. Why are these youngsters so fixed on fiddling with flowers?"

"Many of us view your paintings of large flowers as true icons of feminism. We appreciate the flower's metaphoric identity as a reproductive organ. We champion you as our foremother. There are so many kinds of flowers in your paintings: calla lilies, Oriental poppies, jack-in-the-pulpit, jimsonweed, iris, and red cannas. They have become our positive symbols, our revolutionary images."

"Poppycock! This is all too much," O'Keeffe groans.

"I must have agency over my body," I assert, somewhat defensively. "I'm okay with using my existence as a form of resistance. I need an emphatic symbol for that resistance." What, I wonder, would get her to see her work from our point-of-view? O'Keeffe does not view her flowers with the same gendered gaze as we do. Whatever they once might have seemed to her, by now, after decades of denial, she insists that they are just her close observations of nature, recorded with her particular elan, pizzazz, or whatever you want to call it. She considers herself beyond feminist stereotypes, above the fray.

"How do you choose your subjects then?" I try once more to tame her. "What is your relationship to nature?"

"I was taught in school to paint things as I saw them. But that seemed so limiting! If one could only reproduce nature, and get results always less spectacular than the original, why paint at all?" She looks at me as if I had to understand.

I try again, "But as a woman, how did you see yourself differently than men?"

"I was constantly experimenting. Eventually, I made up my mind to forget all that men had taught me and to paint exactly as I felt."

"Oh, yes!" That's it, I thought and burst out: "I want to know more about your flowers and female imagery, about their link to female sexuality, to female agency."

"You look at my flower and you think you see what I see and you don't," she demurs.

"What," I ask, "about all those images with central cavities and inner spaces?"

"Cavities: That sounds like the dentist! I have painted some interior spaces, such as the view from my own home, the East River seen from inside the apartment in the Shelton. All that concrete and those tall buildings—"

Oh no, I interrupt: "I meant that the flowers seem like metaphors for female anatomical forms, for women's sexuality."

"What metaphors? My work is as objective as I can make it! I suppose that the reason that I got down to an effort to be objective is that I didn't like such interpretations people tried to pin to my images." She continues, "I just learned about some feminist showing slides of my work along with those of other artists at a women's arts festival at some Ivy League university. She had the nerve to argue that these women—from myself to Louise Bourgeois to some Miriam Schapiro—all made art with the same kind of repeated patterns! Imagine: circular, organic, so-called 'biomorphic apertures.' Those openings are supposed to indicate women's preoccupation with their own inner spaces! What a ridiculous premise," O'Keeffe concludes, looking at me with suspicion.

I desperately try to shift the focus: "Why did you decide to paint your flowers so large?"

"Everyone has many associations with a flower. You put your hand to touch it, or lean forward to smell it, or maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking, or give it to someone to please them. But one rarely takes the time to really see a flower. I have painted what each flower is to me and I have painted it big enough so that others would see what I see."

Finally, I cut to the chase: "I love your flowers and would like your permission to reproduce one in color in my book."

"What is your book?"

"My book surveys important women artists who paint."

"What is its exact title?"

"The title is: *Treasury of Great Women Painters from the Renaissance to the Present*."

I now see that O'Keeffe is visibly annoyed. She does not want me or anyone else to put her in a limiting category. She raises her voice and shouts at me, "I am not a woman painter!"

I feel devastated as O'Keeffe stands up and indicates that the interview is over. She glares. "Just do *your* work. Leave mine alone."

at New York University.