

# artscope

100TH ISSUE

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## DONNAMARIA BRUTON & GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: ART AS PUZZLE IN NEWPORT

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2022

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# A SHARED SPOTLIGHT IN NEWPORT

## O'KEEFFE'S THE STAR, BUT DONNAMARIA BRUTON SHINES

Creating art is a puzzle. Interpreting art is also a puzzle – not a crossword type of puzzle, where one and only one word fits the squares across and another word down – art is a puzzle filled with possibilities.

Should the huge flower be painted red or orange? And if Georgia O'Keeffe decides "red," then what color could the background be? Blues and greens? Yes, red flower with blue/green background she decides. Now it is our turn to puzzle over the "meaning" of the red

flower with the blue/green background. We decide; "The red flower is about sex." "No," says O'Keeffe, "it is an abstract red flower."

The color red has many meanings in our Western society: anger, blood, love, Valentine's Day, sex and more. So, when O'Keeffe chooses to paint a "red" flower she automatically teases us to answer "sex" to our interpretation of her puzzle. The puzzle becomes more complex, the "correct" answer shifting from the

### COVER STORY

**GEORGIA O'KEEFFE:  
THINGS I HAD NO WORDS  
FOR**

**DONNAMARIA BRUTON:  
FROM SENSE TO SOUL**

**NEWPORT ART MUSEUM**

**76 BELLEVUE AVENUE**

**NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND**

**THROUGH OCTOBER 16**



Donnamaria Bruton, *Personalities are Portable*, 1995, acrylic on board, stacked diptych, 48" x 48". Courtesy of the Estate of Donnamaria Bruton and Cade Tompkins Projects.





artist's intent to our personal association with the shapes and colors that O'Keeffe uses.

Donnamaria Bruton's large scale paintings present us with more obscure and difficult puzzles, sort of a New York Times super-complex crossword. How I wish Bruton were alive to help guide us through the density of the symbols in her paintings and her intended "true" meanings. She died in 2012 at age 58.

Let us examine Bruton's "Personalities are Portable," 1995, acrylic/collage, an example of her "hide and seek" personal puzzles. Hints are explained in the printed label that tells me she included a "chair, comb, fish and umbrella."

I begin my visual search and see the umbrella pointed like a violent spear toward the bedstead. Its handle is a vicious fish-hook shape painted in black, the color of "death." Is that the fish on a plate in the top corner? I see the spoon and fork, but the serrated knife I spot much later in my visual search. Now, what about those two daggers with round eyes embedded in them? This is the strongest, most violent symbol in the painting. I see them protruding from a "hat, or a head?"

But another viewer, a friend who is a professional psychologist, insists it is a "chair." Yes, she is right, the didactic label says it is a "chair." But I still see the "monster head with fangs and glaring eyes." The milky, wishy-washy collaged background provides a slate board for Bruton's hand-drawn sketchy symbols, but there is one distracting rectangle of vegetable-green off to the left, the only vivid patch of color. Can this be a "window" looking out of her bedroom?

How is the viewer to pull all these personal symbols together? The psychologist interprets the symbols through the lens of sexual content. She points out, correctly, that the folded umbrella rams toward the bed, and that its fish-hook handle is a male sex symbol. I agree. Is the bed a place for daydreaming, or is it a

place for fanged-nightmares? Is the green "window" a place for escape to a happier, cleaner space? But Bruton might object, just as O'Keeffe does and say, "It's NOT about SEX." Are there two solutions to the puzzle? Or was Bruton unaware that psychological-sexual content could be seen in her work; something unintentional and buried under layer upon layer of paint, paper and black scribbled lines? A puzzle.

Moving back to the O'Keeffe exhibit, the next room over from the Bruton paintings, we see a brilliant artist whose work becomes more challenging and complex with every viewing. In this small Newport exhibit, her drawings and prints are well represented. Of particular interest to me is the printed book "Some Memories of Drawings," a collaboration with Leonard Baskin, the well-known printmaker and sculptor who taught at Smith College. He was my drawing and sculpture professor and had a profound impact on my understanding of what is required to be a professional artist. He was brutal with students, demanding exact attention to detail and realism. Students cried in his class and his only verbal instruction was "I like it." However, he and O'Keeffe seem to have hit it off because the book (Meadows Press, 1974, Northampton, MA.) is a gem.

In the puzzle of understanding O'Keeffe, I learned from the "Some Memories" drawing book that she studied Asian calligraphy and this is a real "key" to her abstract floral paintings. The swirling, curving, undulating outlines of her

LEFT: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Place II*, 1944, oil on canvas, 23 7/8" x 30". Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1959 [gift of the artist]. © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

RIGHT: Donnataria Bruton, *Untitled Landscape IV*, 2008-2010, acrylic and paper on board, 72" x 72". Courtesy of the Estate of Donnataria Bruton and Cade Tompkins Projects.





florals derives, I believe, from her calligraphic studies. The flowers are calligraphy-plus-paint. For this reason, I would agree with O'Keeffe when she insists the flowers are not "sex" symbols, even if we see them through Freudian lenses. But it is OK if we solve the interpretation puzzle two ways. It is not a Times crossword.

As the artists aged, O'Keeffe's and Bruton's paintings reveal a personal change in outlook and introspection. Bruton's "Untitled Landscapes III," 2010-2011, and "Untitled Landscape IV," 2008-2010, are painted in horizontal undulating strokes of soft ochres and umbers. They are mellow and romantic visions that remind me of Japanese Meiji screens. Her colorful patches of dense strokes could be Buddhist poets or sages traveling over the deserts. But then, Bruton probably would be perplexed by my interpretation of her puzzle.

O'Keeffe sometimes put her non-threatening flowers aside to explore a dark world of human anguish. "Black Place II" was painted weeks after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. She took her visual clues from the Bisti Badlands near her New Mexico studio. She painted dark black and gray billowing shapes that look like storm clouds blown by desert winds, churning the earth from ridge to ridge, carving out new mesas. Puffy shapes at the painting's bottom edge resemble huge munching teeth and jaws.

"Wave, Night," a 1928 oil painting of the beach at York, Maine, is an early introspective work that harbors no happiness. Depicting the blackest of black nights with no stars, there is a tiny speck of a lighthouse in the

far distance, too far away to be of any help or solace. A single, surging wave oozes over the shore of damp purple sand. A gloomy sight indeed, one that is easily interpreted by the puzzling viewer.

My husband, Robert Neville, a philosopher, explained that the creative and interpretive puzzle has four "parts" rather than just two: creator and interpreter. He claims that the artist can create a painted object; for O'Keeffe the brilliant red flower, and imagine a subjective "feeling" behind the flower; the sensuousness of Asian calligraphy. Looking at "Wave, Night," we the interpreters can see both the objective 'black night and single light' and feel the isolation and subjective terror of the hopeless aloneness in the scene. Thus, creator and interpreter each experience objectivity and subjectivity for the same work of art: four parts.

Bruton's early and mid-career paintings are more subjective. She is intuiting and feeling and layering her way into the creative act. Few are the "objects" in her paintings: the comb, fish and penetrating umbrella. So, with her work, the viewer faces a difficult interpretive process. She is more personal, more obscure, and less universal. Therefore, the average, non-scholarly viewer is more easily attracted to O'Keeffe's work whose puzzles are easier to solve. We can feel confident that we understand O'Keeffe's objective hints of color, shape and recognizable flowers. And they are beautiful to look at and enjoy, sex or no sex.

**Beth Neville**

LEFT: Donnamaria Bruton, *Untitled Landscape III*, 2010-2011, acrylic and paper on board, 72" x 72". Courtesy of the Estate of Donnamaria Bruton and Cade Tompkins Projects.

RIGHT: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Wave, Night*, 1928, oil on canvas, 30" x 36". Courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, purchased as the gift of Charles L. Stillman (PA 1922).