54: Georgia O'Keeffe *Jawbone and Fungus* (1931)

Sarah Whitaker Peters

Georgia O'Keeffe's search for containers from nature that could hold and express her feelings and desires with paint has rarely turned up an odder pairing than the two in *Jawbone and Fungus* (1931). We can only speculate about the intentions behind its form and content. O'Keeffe never helped her paintings with words, but she did say (in her late eighties) that, "I find...I have painted my life—things happening in my life—without knowing."[1] Perhaps this is the most useful key we have.

What did she actually put here? The upper part of an animal's jawbone fills the foreground, and nearly all of the canvas's lower half. O'Keeffe did not identify the jawbone in her title, but it is generally considered to be that of a mule. (In the later 1930s she would paint several complete mule skulls.)

Directly behind the bleached bone is an unnervingly large black fungus. Cropped at its base by the bone, it appears to be levitating rather than growing properly out of the ground. There is a carefully calibrated balance between these two forms, with tactile interplays between the colors, between hard and soft, sharp and round, alive and dead—to name the most obvious ones.

Georgia O'Keeffe,
1887–1986
Jawbone and Fungus, 1931
Oil on canvas, 17 x 20 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
51.11a

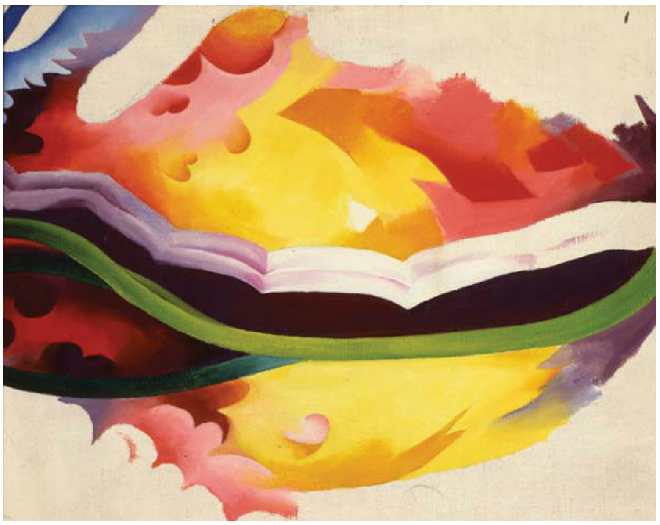
What were bones to O'Keeffe? She found them "beautiful," she said in 1939, and "keenly alive."[2] By the time *Jawbone and Fungus* was painted, she had come to regard New Mexico as her psychic homeland, a place where "I felt as grateful for my largest hurts as I did for my largest happiness."[3] In Taos, she had often gone to Indian dances, "sings," and other sacred ceremonies with Tony Luhan, the Navajo husband of her hostess Mabel Dodge Luhan. And she began to have an intense interest in the still-functioning Anasazi-Pueblo culture of New Mexico. It therefore seems unlikely she wouldn't have known that shamans in primitive societies the world over believed bones to be sacred. (They were not only placed in graves as regenerative symbols, they were used in divination and healing practices as well.)

The choice of a jawbone from the ass family may be significant for the artist's personal meaning. A beautiful shape to be sure. But with O'Keeffe abstract design is always a means, not an end in itself. As a symbolist painter, she never intends what you see to be all of what you get. Therefore we should probably be alert to the fact that the mule, the hinny, and the donkey are famous within the animal kingdom for being durable, sure-footed, obstinate, and hardy—traits that belong memorably to the artist (who lived to ninety-eight).

As to the fungus, O'Keeffe has juxtaposed it with the jawbone in a peculiarly threatening way. It towers over the bone like an ominous black cloud. The fungus is a plant of abnormal, spongy growth which has time-honored connections with morbidity.

Any meaning we glean from this picture must, of course, include the colors: variations on black, brown, and white. It should perhaps be stressed that white always held a specific meaning for O'Keeffe. Her husband, the great photographer Alfred Stieglitz, often referred to her as white. ("Georgia is a wonder....if ever there was a whiteness she is that."[4])

Could the white jawbone be one of O'Keeffe's abstract self-portraits, and the black fungus one of Stieglitz? There is some context to suggest that this is so. The abstract portrait was a Stieglitz circle specialty. Inspired by New York Dada during World War I, Stieglitz encouraged the artists around him to analyze one another's personalities (including his own) by abstract means in order to create new forms and abstract symbols. O'Keeffe wrote a friend in 1915 that she was crazy about this stuff—that it just took her breath away.[5] But she never admitted to doing it herself.



Georgia O'Keeffe,
1887–1986
Untitled (Abstraction), ca. 1923
Oil on canvas, 17 x 20 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
51.11b

Why would she want to image Stieglitz as a black fungus? For one thing, by 1931 she had come to the sad recognition that working alongside him at Lake George, New York, as she'd done for over twelve years, was a dead-end for her art. There was, as well, an acute crisis in their marriage—caused largely by Stieglitz's infidelity. Her distress was such that she would suffer a nervous breakdown between 1932 and 1933 and be unable to paint for nearly two years.

In 1918, their first summer together, Stieglitz had photographed O'Keeffe at Lake George wearing his familiar black cape (in effect, his mantle). The unmistakable implication is that she was under his protection (he had already become her dealer as well as her lover). It may not be too fanciful then to suggest that the cape/mantle had now become a threatening, engulfing black fungus to her, one which she had to shed and, ultimately, destroy in order to preserve and nurture her own identity.

ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Georgia O'Keeffe,
1887–1986
Adah Mann, 1907
Graphite on wove paper,
6 5/16 x 8 5/16 in.
Gift of Mrs. Harriet Begg, 96.94

We know from her biographers that O'Keeffe had a life-long history of depression. It could be that this low-colored painting is a kind of drastic portent of her severe nervous breakdown a year later. It should also be noted that on the verso is a high-colored unfinished abstraction (ca. 1923), about which almost nothing is known—only that the artist discarded it for reasons of her own.

There is wonderfully original painting in *Jawbone and Fungus*. Consider the complex visual ambiguity: is this a studio still life or a landscape? The shadow cast by the fungus suggests the former, but the low horizon line and the horizontal strips of sepia, nut brown, and gray beneath make it read equally easily as a bare desert landscape. There are some photographic qualities in the work as well. The distance between bone and fungus is artificially compressed, as if by a lens, for emotional effect. And the isolated magnification we see in these forms had become a notable feature of her work after 1924, especially with flowers.

All of O'Keeffe's paintings are susceptible to multiple interpretations and meanings. Most often, the subjects she chose suggest the universal and spiritual transitions in a woman's life cycle. Unlike *Jawbone and Fungus*, which is exceptional in O'Keeffe's oeuvre, her New Mexico bones of the 1940s will dance cheerfully in the sky like angels on the wing.[6]

O'Keeffe adored secrecy for its own sake. Her art, and her life, are full of the maneuvers of concealment. Was secrecy the engine of her imagination? A good, forever unanswerable, question.

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