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Letting Georgia Go: Lydia Bauman's New Mexico Paintings

Lydia Bauman's *Looking for Georgia* is a body of work made in response to both a place and an artist's rendition of that place. At the large-scale exhibition of Georgia O'Keeffe's work at the Tate Gallery in London in 2016, both the artist and the art historian in Bauman wondered to what extent the famous paintings, at once topographical and abstract, might have captured the essential character of that landscape, its *genius loci*. To the empiricism of Bauman's initial aim – to see that countryside "with my own eyes" – was linked the desire to pit her own experience of it against a celebrated and powerful artistic precedent. Conceptually, the quest acknowledges the extent to which encounters with "landscape" are seldom virgin.

Fleeing from a cheating husband, the pioneering photographer and gallerist Alfred Steiglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe arrived in northern New Mexico in 1929 as a guest of wealthy heiress and art patron, Mabel Dodge Luhan. Luhan had run a prominent arts salon in Florence, and then again in New York, before settling in Taos in 1917, where she married a Taos Pueblo native. The Native American Taos Pueblo, in existence for a millennium, is considered to be the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States. The arid climate of that area, its rich culture and a spectacular combination of physical features attesting to a long and complex geological history, have long made it compelling to visitors. With its adobe architecture and limpid plateau air, its dramatic forms and sharp chromatic contrasts, this region has emanated a sense of being both geologically and culturally ancient, and began attracting American and European born artists in the late nineteenth century. Here as elsewhere, western artists had initiated their flirtation with the apparent simplicity and rawness of non-western cultural forms and nativist stories of origin. In 1915, the Taos Society of Artists was founded by a group of European trained painters. The art colony that sprang up around them was sustained after the society itself disbanded in 1927. Luhan continued to draw artists and writers to her salon, though she was reputedly bullying and strident and generated several feuds, most famously with D. H. and Frieda Lawrence.

This all attests to the fact that Taos was already "Taos" when O'Keeffe arrived, a place italicised or contained in quotation marks by virtue of the iconicity of its features and its repeated representation in works of art. O'Keeffe's paintings of northern New Mexico from the 1930s and 1940s are among her best known works, contributing to the already iconic

nature of the place something of a brand image, to the extent that the sobriquet "O'Keeffe country" has come to be used to describe it. This moniker applies most specifically to the land on and around Ghost Ranch, O'Keeffe's 21,000 acre holding, not far from the village of Abiquiú in the Rio Arriba County, where she lived and worked for part of every year for almost half a century. In 1945, while still maintaining a foothold in New York, she bought a second home further south in the town of Abiquiú itself, settling permanently in New Mexico in 1949, three years after the death of Alfred Stieglitz, whom she had never divorced. O'Keeffe lived in New Mexico until her own death in 1986.

Georgia O'Keeffe: a woman who spent much of her creative life alone in the New Mexico desert, outside of the mainstream locations of avant garde experimentation, yet also living out the performative Gauguinesque trope of the artist who needs to escape the strictures of conventional, polite society. Bauman was fascinated by the phenomenon of O'Keeffe, and wanted to "gain a better insight into the nature of her achievement as one of the most celebrated American painters of the 20th century," as she states in her promotional introduction to *Looking for Georgia*. The body of work was built around a trip to New Mexico in 2017, in Georgia's footsteps.

Following the trail of a celebrated or cherished artist tends to be the remit of the enthusiastic, culturally informed walker. We might eagerly traipse around Turner's Northumberland coast, Constable's Flatford Mill, Cézanne's Montagne Saint Victoire or Monet's Giverny, comparing present prospects with mental images of painted views. Similarly, literary biographers sometimes shadow their subjects. They do so in a bid to know more, to see better, to dig deeper. "Biography," writes Richard Holmes, "meant a book about someone's life. Only, for me, it was to become a kind of pursuit, a tracking of the physical trail of someone's path through the past, a following of footsteps." Holmes, however, also recognised the ultimate – or indeed logical – impossibility of such a pursuit: "You would never catch them," he says, "no, you would never quite catch them. But maybe, if you were lucky, you might write about the pursuit of that fleeting figure in such a way as to bring it alive in the present."

Lydia Bauman may well have intended to pursue Georgia O'Keeffe in order to bring her work alive in the present. In doing so, she submits O'Keeffe's identification with the place to scrutiny. It is not by chance that O'Keeffe's painting of a rust-coloured range of hills should be titled *My Red Hills*. Wilderness, if it exists at all, is an elusive thing. Indeed, the very fact that the countryside on and around Ghost Ranch has come to be known as "O'Keeffe country"

illustrates the extent to which images of nature readily appropriate the imprint of complex cultural tropes, while accommodating symbolic human ownership.

By the same token, locations that enshrine an artist's sense of place have, over the course of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, fallen prey to the global museumisation of heritage sites. Such locations provide "experiences" that are processed for consumption by tourist, culture, leisure and lifestyle industries. And so, it is no surprise that today, Ghost Ranch should be the home of workshops and retreats, offering landscape trail rides on horseback, "for riders of all skill levels." And in the shadow of Plaza Blanca, an architectural formation of white sandstone cliffs near Abiquiú, stands Dar al Islam, a quiet mosque and Islamic study centre run by a non-profit organisation committed to "an integrated, appreciative society" and to "compassion and empathy between all communities." The building of the beautiful, white, interlocking dome structure, designed by an Egyptian architect and completed in 1981, is said to have been funded by Saudi money.

There is, in the definition and determination of Bauman's project, a wish to engage in a dialogue with O'Keeffe's paintings from, and of, that place. But clearly, it has been part of her strategy to eschew any concern with the social uses to which "O'Keeffe country" has been pressed, the ways in which "wilderness" has been curated. There is no sign of human life even in the smaller works that include architectural elements, such as the renditions of Taos Pueblo. Instead, she focuses on the topographic, geological, structural and spatial features of the sites, and her visceral responses to them and to the light through which they are revealed.

Immersing herself "on location," so to speak, Bauman finds that O'Keeffe's rendition of the landscape yielded first and foremost to questions of pictorial design and integrity, rather than to a desire for verisimilitude. "In her modernist way," Bauman observes in an interview, "common to all early 20th is century artists, she preferred to flatten, crop, smooth out, simplify both form and colour, even while living and breathing that landscape for five decades." And, like O'Keeffe's, Bauman's response to the locations is one in which the integrity and materiality of the art object overrides the quest for a chimerical perceptual accuracy.

In asking questions about the character of the landscape, its inherent qualities, Bauman put her finger on the appropriative nature of O'Keeffe's relationship with the countryside she drolly dubbed "my backyard." However, contrary to her declared aim, Bauman's work itself suggests that she quickly understood that the earlier artist had led her to a place, only to let go of her hand. For in the numerous paintings and drawings that constitute *Looking for Georgia*, what we see is less an engagement with Georgia O'Keeffe – less a conversation

through landscape – than an absorption in, and observation of, the same dramatic elements: Red Hill, Black Mesa, Mesa Pedernal, Shining Rock, Chimney Rock, the Plaza Blanca. If, knowingly, Bauman cannot tackle the countryside of northern New Mexico as "landscape" without acknowledging O'Keeffe, it nevertheless remains clear that her principal prompt for these works is what Cézanne famously called "the motif." The thing itself. What the countryside offers.

Cézanne painting *sur le motif* entailed engaging with the process of painting in a manner that replaced literary or symbolic narratives of anteriority with phenomenological plenitude: being *here, now*. The motif, then, revealed itself to Cézanne's eyes incrementally, in and through the process of recording and making. Looking, marking, looking again, adjusting... and so on. Cézanne's sense of an exploratory and constructive kind of looking and making, undertaken in the studio rather than *en plein air*, gives way, for both O'Keeffe and Bauman, to an engagement with the landscape as already given. O'Keeffe and Bauman are, likewise, studio artists, conceiving their landscapes through simplified forms in which nature has been manipulated in order to heighten a sense of pictorial drama and underline certain fabricated and abstract qualities. In other words, for both artists, "landscape" presents itself as a culturally mediated construct. Nothing could more succinctly and wryly sum up this sense of being simultaneously in nature and in culture, than O'Keeffe's conversion of her old Ford into a mobile studio, containing and channelling her access to nature, her view of it.

For Bauman, the process of mediation takes place through the construction of an ideation that is archival in its nature. Her immersion in the countryside is punctual and brief, an intense, two-week research trip, in the company of her son, Karl Dudman. Acting as both driver and assistant, Dudman, a recent graduate of anthropology and environmental studies, with a keen interest in cultural appropriations of indigenous lands, also made a body of work during the journey, a series of dramatic photographs that testify to Georgia O'Keefe's influence on representations of the New Mexico landscape. Bauman's methodology – a large body of work issuing from a research trip – is distinctly twenty-first century, even if her work does not evince the more common characteristics, such as the use of text and photography, of research-driven art. Her working process entails the employment of recording technology (a digital camera, an iPad) and a procedure that replaces the sensory immersion and immediacy of *plein air* painting with a form of registering and collecting that facilitates the provision of data, to be later mined in the studio.

What Bauman took home from that trip was a profusion of visual ideas and prompts, in the shape of sketches rendered – these, yes, in watercolour pencil and in situ – and photographs. As artefacts that, by their very nature, flatten and abstract space, photographs have served Bauman well, since she consciously plays with the relationship between the three-dimensionality of the motif and a modernist flattening of pictorial form. The elements of her landscapes are sketched in, brushed and stippled, built up materially from thin to thick – from wash to impasto – and from tonal to chromatic. Sometimes, texture is then scraped away in some areas, while scumbling binds together disparate forms. The forms of the landscape are built up almost like objects in a still life. Svetlana Alpers, writing of Cézanne, could well be describing Bauman: "despite all the excursions outside to paint particular motifs," she observes, his [her] landscapes share with still life the "absence of people, of seasons, of time of day." Ubiquitously diurnal and bright, Bauman's works seems to tap into something notional and essential, rather than the detailed or specific.

Favouring square or horizontally oriented formats, Bauman occasionally juxtaposes canvases, transforming them into diptychs or triptychs, with a generous, panoramic spread. The road dwindling into the distance, the cliffs massing up against a crystalline sky, the Chama River splitting in two, are presented through a tilting up of the picture plane. Nevertheless, each work offers the spectator a hypothetical viewing position. Contrariwise, O'Keeffe frequently pushes the spectator away and out, raising the horizon line to reach almost the top of the canvas, and cropping the foreground away altogether, so that the motif nearly fully fills the picture plane. So where O'Keeffe confronts the spectator with a sense of claustrophobia in the framing and filling of her surfaces, Bauman offers us freer access. An invitation, visual rather than haptic, issues from works where stark shadows create relief. Summoning a broad range of methods and materials, Bauman invokes the elements of landscape – stone, water, branch, brush, sky – in repoussoir compositions that ask the viewer imaginatively to occupy some middle ground, around which the landscape unfolds horizontally.

In O'Keeffe's work, the motif – whether mountain range, cliff top or gorge – is dramatically abstracted and simplified, occasionally conflating several points of view. The forms are bold and smoothly contoured: everything approximates the whitened, whittled-down, architectural condition of bone. In Bauman's work, those same motifs – summoned precisely because of their pre-existence in the older artist's work – are differently abstracted. They are frequently flattened through the use of gold, copper or silver leaf, or the application of highly textured resins, grit and sand. These add a richness and variety of surface to the works. While functioning metonymically, such materials also operate anti-realistically, calling attention not

so much to the thing represented, as to the surface of the works themselves. In other words, Bauman's exploratory, sensuous relationship with the materials of making disrupts any illusion of the three dimensional existence of the motif. Nevertheless, a sense of three-dimensionality persists in the drawing, and in the relative scale and positioning of each landscape element in relation to a viewer, whose physical position is also the point to which each of Bauman's landscapes is addressed. Inherited from early modernist painting, this tension between the three-dimensionality of the motif and the flatness of the support (and concomitantly, between figuration and abstraction) remains one of the prevailing characteristics of Bauman's works.

Bauman's paintings from "O'Keeffe country" underline the extent to which shadowing another artist becomes a way of opening up a range of pictorial subjects, more than a means of conceptually unpacking that earlier artist's work. Arguably, such a mission can only be accomplished in another medium: say in words, or in photographs. But perhaps, more broadly, acts of "shadowing" are most interesting precisely where they fail. The genre-defying writer, Geoff Dyer, has explored this. If Richard Holmes recognises the fact that the geographical pursuit of an artist is doomed to incompleteness or failure – you never quite catch them – Dyer takes this a step further. For him, such pursuits serve to bring the pursuer back to him or herself. And like Bauman, Dyer found himself in pursuit in New Mexico, on the trail of D. H. Lawrence, who, like O'Keeffe, had arrived there as a guest of Mabel Dodge Luhan's.

If Dyer sets out to uncover and discover D. H. Lawrence by following his trajectory, what he encounters and hilariously describes is the futility of such endeavours. You stand on the site previously occupied by the object of your pursuit, filling his or her footsteps, but the attempted embodiment ends in frustration. Something ostensibly numinous escapes you, and you are confronted with the facticity of the merely phenomenological. Even while imaginatively occupying the persona of the artist you are stalking, you look at the view and "nothing changes, everything remains exactly the same." How often we travel to distant lands, only to discover ourselves! If Lydia Bauman did, indeed, go looking for Georgia O'Keeffe, it is clear that what she found, standing on the sites once occupied by O'Keeffe, was renewed motivation. She also found an ever replenishing source of energetic and inventive making, not only under the skies of New Mexico, but also – and especially – back in her studio in Stoke Newington.

[Stamford, January 2019]