

ENGENDERED MODERN  
THE URBAN LANDSCAPES OF GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, FLORINE STETTMEIER,  
AND BERNICE ABBOTT

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the dynamic relationship between artists Georgia O’Keeffe, Florine Stettheimer, and Berenice Abbott in relation to the growing urban landscape of New York City in the 1920s and 1930s. Previous scholarship has drawn parallels between these three artists’ careers solely in terms related to their biography and gender identity rather than their work. In contrast, my project identifies a common formal subject that links an experimental phase in all three women’s work, and explores the reasons these three individual creators found portraying the city to be an effective strategy for developing her own take on modernist style. Inspired by rapid development, each artist made work that shared her inventive vision of the city. Using visual analysis and historical context associated with the second wave of skyscraper construction as well as the second generation “New Woman” movement, I argue that each artist produced idiosyncratic art that makes sense of the rapidly morphing city surrounding them. Eschewing conventional gender expectations and traditional art historical narratives, the three artists tell visual stories that illustrate life in a modern urban city. Each woman’s goals and artistic expectations differ, but they all share the struggle to achieve professionally despite systemic roadblocks placed before them by the male-dominated art world. With the city as their muse, they utilize the metaphor of organic growth to encapsulate the city in flux.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before.”

-Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

Surviving as a female in a male-dominated professional world is difficult even in the twenty-first century. Now, imagine what women artists must have faced in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s, shortly after the Suffrage movement won the female vote in 1920 and long before Hillary Clinton became the first female nominee for president by a major political party in 2016, Katharine Graham became the first American female CEO in 1972, or Mildred H. McAfee was commissioned as the first woman in the U.S. Naval Reserve in 1942.<sup>1</sup> In the male-dominated art world of the early twentieth century, it took a woman of formidable strength to succeed. New York City's art market, controlled by the male avant-garde elite, championed and cherished the artistic opinions and output of male painters and photographers. These men served as gatekeepers to artistic success, selecting the pieces and artists that would represent a modern and urban America to the world. Women artists often were excluded from this private club, either due to lack of professional and educational opportunity, or because men believed their work and voices less capable of expressing the spirit of the rapidly morphing urban cityscape. In spite of these limitations, female painters Georgia O'Keeffe, Florine Stettheimer, and photographer Berenice Abbott rose to that challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> “Clinton, Hillary Rodham,” *History, Art and Archives* online, [http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CLINTON,-Hillary-Rodham-\(C001041\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/C/CLINTON,-Hillary-Rodham-(C001041)/).  
Graham, Katharine, *Personal History* (New York: Vintage, 1998).  
Elizabeth G. Hendricks, “Mildred McAfee Horton(1900:1994): Portrait of a Pathbreaking Christian Leader.” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 76, no. 2 (1997).

On a stylistic level, their artistic approaches could not be more different: O’Keeffe was a painter dedicated to abstraction throughout much of her career, inspired by forms found both in the urban and natural world, while Stettheimer painted in a witty figurative style, with elongated and androgynous people intermingling in a modern setting, surrounded by symbols of capitalistic success. Abbott, a “straight” documentary photographer, captured realism in her architectural subjects through the juxtaposition of old and new. Nonetheless all three were motivated by a similar ambition—to create work that made sense of the rapidly changing modern society that surrounded them. They used commanding perspectives, subtle symbols, striking colors and tonality not only to illustrate modern urban landscapes but also to critique the various social structures and practices confronting women in the modern urban age. Despite facing discrimination at the hands of the male led arts establishment, including critics, collectors, gallerists, and even romantic partners, they persevered and produced urban landscapes full of complexity and layered with their experience as artists in the early twentieth century.

As New York City’s position on the world stage became more prominent, so did its importance as artistic subject matter, drawing the best American artists to render the city in all its complexities. During crucial developmental phases, each artist spent time in New York City in their late teens and early twenties and chose to return to the city in their thirties or forties. O’Keeffe and Stettheimer both received traditional arts instruction, rooted in realism, at the Art Students League; O’Keeffe studied there from 1907 to 1908 at the age of nineteen, and Stettheimer spent three years there spanning 1892 to 1895 from the ages of twenty-one to twenty-four. Abbott did not receive formal artistic training in New York, but did live there from 1918 to 1921 from the ages of twenty to twenty three, residing in Greenwich Village and working odd jobs while trying her hand at sculpture. After short stints, they left New York City for a variety of financial,

familial and inspirational reasons: O’Keeffe taught in the South and Midwest, and Stettheimer and Abbott were drawn to Europe, immersing themselves in its art scene. After long absences, each felt an individual call to return to the city.

In the 1920s, New York was experiencing its second wave of skyscraper construction. The “cathedrals of commerce” built at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century were surpassed by 1,000-foot high edifices constructed in the financial district as well as midtown.<sup>2</sup> These turn-of-the-century skyscrapers, decorated with neoclassical pillars and stonework ornamentation, stood side-by-side with a new architectural form, complete with an oversized base, sleek pointed tower, and Art-Deco motifs. The modern skyline grew significantly above the original urban horizon that the artists saw in their first stay in the city. Inspired by the new growth around them, each artist used the changing city as subject, fashioning art that highlighted their individual abilities to portray a modern metropolis.

These three women also experienced New York during the height of the second generation “New Woman” movement. This activity, which began in 1875 and lasted until roughly 1930, was punctuated by the enfranchisement of women in 1920. The movement focused on achieving three basic tenets: female suffrage, career freedom, and liberation of female dress.<sup>3</sup> This endeavor began during each woman’s childhood so many of these ideas shaped them in their youth, but they were part of the first generation of women who both reaped the benefits of enhanced social possibility and also pioneered what these changing roles for women would look like. Though a wider array of social roles were gaining acceptance, women who chose independence and careers

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<sup>2</sup> Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Jean V. Matthews. *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women’s Movement in America, 1875-1930*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003.

over family were considered selfish. Women were not trained or encouraged to be self-supporting, and an interest in the arts should be a hobby and nothing else. In the 1910s and 1920s, women began to outfit themselves in ways that suited their individual needs. An artist's work demanded functional and comfortable clothes that could get messy and allow freer movement in the modern marketplace. O'Keeffe made much of her own clothes and preferred unfitted silhouettes, simple in style and color, Stettheimer had pantaloons custom made, and Abbott wore menswear inspired jackets while sporting a bold, short haircut.<sup>4</sup>

As women living during the second generation "New Woman" movement, each artist put her career above all else. None had children, and O'Keeffe was the only one who married. They were dedicated to their art as much as they might have been to a husband, family member, or partner. By refusing to compromise their talent or conform to societal expectations, they forged their own paths to success. Historians Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco assert: "In crucial ways, New Women disrupted conventions of gender by refusing traditional performances of such feminine traits as passivity, aversion to public space, indifference to sexuality, and lack of creative genius."<sup>5</sup> O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, and Abbott certainly challenge traditional notions of femininity and redefined what it means to be a woman artist in the modern era.

Chapter one introduces many of the urban landscapes that Georgia O'Keeffe completed while living in New York City from 1925 to 1932. Even though her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, discouraged her from rendering the Manhattan skyline, she painted

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<sup>4</sup> Bloemink, "Imagine the Fun Florine Stettheimer Would Have with Donald Trump: The Artist as Feminist, Democrat, and Chronicler of Her Time, *Art News*, 6 July 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/07/06/imagine-the-fun-florine-stettheimer-would-have-with-donald-trump-the-artist-as-feminist-democrat-and-chronicler-of-her-time/>.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco, "Introduction: Imagining and Embodying New Womanhood" in *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011): 8.

striking skyscrapers found on walks around her midtown neighborhood. Inspired by the many captivating lines, shapes and colors defined by the monstrous structures that surrounded her, she created work that showcases her perceptive attention to forms from the natural and manmade world. At this point in her artistic career, she was frustrated with the sexualized rhetoric attached to her work. Painting the city, an enterprise conventionally seen as masculine, gave her the opportunity to prove her abilities, while countering these gendered perceptions.

In chapter two, I examine the paintings of Florine Stettheimer from 1918 to 1940, in which prominently feature modern buildings. In her playful and idiosyncratic work, stylized figures are interwoven amongst modern streets and interiors. Her human figures are dynamically grouped and interact joyously within their environments. The work simultaneously serves as a celebration and critique of modern society, as Stettheimer herself was both an art world insider and outsider. She wrote biting poetry that complements many of her paintings and her witty and humorous words served as both a field guide to modern life and an expression of her thoughts on modernity. Her embrace of the frilly, floral, and campy in her paintings humorously subverts traditional ideas of femininity. She championed ladylike details and placed them alongside striking skyscrapers.

Berenice Abbott, the subject of chapter three, working during the 1930s, created an archive of photographs that capture the city at a crucial moment in its history. Photographing in a documentary style, she saw her project as timely and necessary, as it was her duty to record old New York before it was swept away in the rush to build new. However, her devotion to the old did not overshadow her interest in the new. Atop skyscrapers and at street level, she photographed from high and low vantage points, translating her unique vision of New York City into a succession of

complementary images that offer an apparently truthful account of the rapidly modernizing city.

As modern artists and “New Women,” O’Keeffe, Stettheimer, and Abbott take on the task of artistically representing the modern city. Despite facing gender bias, discrimination, and unfavorable critical reception, each woman succeeded in producing art that showcases her modern New York City. Through dedicated observation of the urban landscape around them, they left their mark on the art world and challenged the gendered narratives that historically marginalized female artists. Today, their powerful, dynamic, and personal works have staked claim in the lineage of great American artists who encapsulate the spirit of the modern city. They are no longer just “female” artists, but artists who brilliantly and successfully depict the intricacies of life in the urban metropolis. Scholars have tended to discuss their work in biographical or gendered terms, but this does a disservice to them as artists. Gender is a narrow window through which these artists’ work was conventionally viewed. The output of these three women stands out because their artistic renderings were fresh and exciting, and they redefined what a modern interpretation of the city could look like, regardless of the sex of its creator.

## CHAPTER 2

### GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: FUSING URBANISM AND NATURE

Georgia O'Keeffe's oeuvre is full of natural iconography: bright and bold florals, crisp, magnified renderings of life-giving pelvic bones, and ethereal, weightless clouds. Her characteristic approach draws the viewer in by closely cropping her motifs, inviting the viewer into the picture and thereby forcing us to confront her ingenuity and skill as an artist. Her ease in commanding motifs traditionally labeled feminine is well known and documented by distinguished art historians, including Wanda Corn and Barbara Buhler Lynes.<sup>6</sup> Her New York cityscapes however represent an unusual, and less fully explored moment in her career. Although O'Keeffe's skill in depicting urban cityscapes has been explored by Vivien Green Fryd, Anna C. Chave, and Jonathan Weinberg, the complexities she lent each work have not been fully unpacked.<sup>7</sup> O'Keeffe completed her cityscapes between 1925 and 1932, when the artist lived more or less permanently in New York City with her husband Alfred Stieglitz. The paintings mark a temporary iconographic shift in her work away from purely natural still lifes and landscapes toward urban motifs, a realm of art that during the early twentieth century was customarily dominated by O'Keeffe's male colleagues in the Stieglitz circle. Because of this, the tendency has been to read O'Keeffe's natural subjects as feminine and her cityscapes

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<sup>6</sup> Wanda M. Corn, "And The Home of the Brave" and "The Great American Thing," in *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 193-292.

Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Vivien Green Fryd, "Georgia O'Keeffe's "Radiator Building": Gender, Sexuality, Modernism, and Urban Imagery," *Winterthur Portfolio* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 269-289.

Anna C. Chave, "Who Will Paint New York?: "The World's New Art Center" and the Skyscraper Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe," *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 1991): 86-107.

Jonathan Weinberg, "Woman without Men: O'Keeffe's Spaces," in *Ambition & Love in Modern American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 104-138.

as relatively masculine. In reality, as this chapter argues, such gendered binaries offer limited interpretive insight into a pivotal moment in this artist's creative development. Though certainly shaped by O'Keeffe's relationship and experience as a woman artist, the urban landscapes are layered with complex notions of life in the modern era, and above all, serve her goal to "fill a space in a beautiful way."<sup>8</sup> She applied this rule to every canvas, whether in her artistic output or personal aesthetic choices, creating what she saw as aesthetically pleasing environments. Throughout this stretch of her career, O'Keeffe juxtaposed nature and industry, supplying the genre of urban landscapes with works that pose questions about growth and the role of urbanism in the modern art world. Inspired by the architectural changes taking place all around her in a rapidly modernizing New York City, she translated the urban environment into fundamental geometric forms composed of lines, shapes and colors. Her city acts as an extension of nature, growing like an organism untethered to gravity. She is a careful observer of natural growth, be it a skyscraper or a flower, and breaks down subjects into forms that are magnetic and aesthetically appealing. In this way, the cityscapes, like the still lifes and landscapes that make up the majority of her paintings, deal with gendered experience but are by no means limited to this interpretive framework.

New York City played a significant role in O'Keeffe's artistic formation even before she took up full time residence there. She first studied at the age of twenty at the Art Students' League in the fall of 1907 through the spring of 1908 and later continued her studies at Teachers College, Columbia University from the fall of 1914 through the spring of 1915.<sup>9</sup> During this time, O'Keeffe made a living as an art teacher, reserving

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<sup>8</sup> Katharine Kuh, "Georgia O'Keeffe," in *The Artist's Voice: Talks With Seventeen Modern Artists* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2000): 190.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Cowart, Juan Hamilton and Sarah Greenough. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987): 291

summers for continuing her education under the direction of some of America's best instructors, including the abstract artist Arthur Wesley Dow, who proved to be highly influential in O'Keeffe's artistic trajectory, giving her the guidance to venture into her signature abstractions.<sup>10</sup> In January of 1916, O'Keeffe's friend from Columbia, Anita Pollitzer, recognizing her talent and promise, showed a number of O'Keeffe's drawings to Alfred Stieglitz, owner of the 291 Gallery. Stieglitz was a photographer, champion of modern art, and most importantly, an influential promoter and voice within the New York art scene. Stieglitz, impressed by O'Keeffe's ability, declared the drawings were the "purest, finest, sincerest things that have entered 291 in a long while."<sup>11</sup> A season later, Stieglitz mounted an exhibition of emerging artists and made the decision to include ten of O'Keeffe's abstract drawings in the show without her consent.<sup>12</sup> O'Keeffe heard about the exhibition, became enraged, and went to the gallery to demand her work be removed from the walls. But, after discussing the matter with Stieglitz in person, she ultimately decided her drawings could stay.<sup>13</sup>

Over the next few years the two kept up an intense, heartfelt correspondence. Stieglitz constantly desired to learn more about her art, as evidenced in a letter he wrote to her: "Of course I am wondering what you have been painting--what it looks like--what you have been full of--The Great Child pouring out some more of her Woman self on paper--purely--truly--unspoiled."<sup>14</sup> This early sentiment serves as an early example of the

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<sup>10</sup> Kuh, *The Artist's Voice*, 189-190.

<sup>11</sup> Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Lynes, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Lynes, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Lynes, 7.

rhetoric and language he assigned to her work, art created from the naive and pure perspective of a young woman just coming into her own talent. O’Keeffe’s view of her work was more simplistic; she desired to convey herself artistically through images rather than words. In a letter written to Stieglitz in February of 1916, she wrote, “I have been just trying to express myself--...I just have to say things you know--Words and I are not good friends at all except with some people.”<sup>15</sup>

Stieglitz mounted his first one-woman show of O’Keeffe’s work in the spring of 1917.<sup>16</sup> At this time, O’Keeffe was teaching at the West Texas State Normal College (now West Texas A&M) in Canyon, Texas, but by the spring of 1918, she had permanently relocated to New York at Stieglitz’s invitation.<sup>17</sup> A romance immediately blossomed between them, and as soon as O’Keeffe arrived in New York City, Stieglitz moved in with her, despite their significant age difference--O’Keeffe was thirty-one years old and Stieglitz was fifty-four--and the fact that Stieglitz was already married. He began divorce proceedings but was not granted one until 1924. By December of 1924, they were finally able to marry, and their union continued, despite an affair on the part of Stieglitz, until his death in 1946.<sup>18</sup>

At the start of their relationship, however, Stieglitz was indeed convinced he had found the great American female modernist, and insisted upon seeing her work in these highly gendered terms. While Stieglitz viewed and promoted her work as that of a “Woman” artist expressing emotion and purity, he was also drawn to her ability to capture the unconscious, which he saw as the state of being at the true root of modern

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<sup>15</sup> Cowart, Hamilton, and Greenough, *Art and Letters*, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Lynes, *O’Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lynes, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Lynes, 8.

abstraction, claiming “art begins where thinking ends.”<sup>19</sup> O’Keeffe’s work flowed from her mind onto the canvas, and Stieglitz found a way to frame her work as a differentiated illustration of his American modernist goals. Most importantly, as a promoter and artist, Stieglitz was heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories about not only the unconscious but also human sexuality as main driving factors in artistic expression. With this in mind, Stieglitz perceived O’Keeffe’s art as a frank representation of her feminine sexuality and promoted it as such to the critics and public alike.<sup>20</sup> In the same way, he controlled the masculine rhetoric associated with other artists in his circle, such as John Marin and Arthur Dove.<sup>21</sup> Stieglitz was known to invite critics to exhibitions in his galleries, leading them through the space and lecturing to them throughout on topics of sexuality and the influence of the unconscious. He was so persuasive that critic Edmund Wilson even described the sensation of being led through a room of art by an emphatic Stieglitz: “When I came away, I couldn’t help wondering a little whether it hadn’t been a case of the innocent young serpent being swallowed by the wily old dove.”<sup>22</sup> Stieglitz, the dove, lured the critics who imagined themselves giving an independent interpretation into parroting his own rhetoric. Shortly after Stieglitz’s death, O’Keeffe similarly admitted he “was the leader or he didn’t play...It was his game and we all played along or left the game.”<sup>23</sup> Stieglitz was masterful not only in framing critical

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<sup>19</sup> Lynes, 9-16.

<sup>20</sup> Lynes, 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> Corn, “And the Home of the Brave,” 241.

<sup>22</sup> Lynes, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Fryd, “Radiator Building,” 287.

dialogue and reception of the artists he represented and showcased in his galleries, but also in using his position of power as leverage to win in any scenario.

While Stieglitz was interested in popular and progressive contemporary theories in the sciences circulating through the high-minded avant-garde circles in Europe and North America, O’Keeffe’s own interests lay in keeping up with current cultural and political issues. O’Keeffe was a member of the National Woman’s Party and supported the suffrage movement’s demand for the female vote.<sup>24</sup> She enjoyed reading political science and literature, attended plays, lectures on suffrage, and was fond of live music. She actively read new arts publications, and appreciated writings about art by artists, particularly Wassily Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*.<sup>25</sup> In this essay, Kandinsky emphasizes the significance of form and color in abstract painting, arguing,

Form, in a narrow sense, is the boundary between one surface and another: that is its external meaning. But it also has an internal significance, of varying intensity; and properly speaking *form is the external expression of interior meaning*...It is evident that form harmony must rest only on the purposive vibration of the human soul.<sup>26</sup>

Early in her career, O’Keeffe strove to express herself in abstract forms, and Kandinsky’s philosophy provided validation for her attention to form, line, and shape. Interestingly enough, O’Keeffe and Stieglitz were independently drawn to Kandinsky’s writings. O’Keeffe learned about Kandinsky’s words, funneled through her teacher Dow, absorbing his practical methodology, while Stieglitz was one of the first Americans to read Kandinsky’s book after it was published in 1911 and reprinted a selection of it in his

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<sup>24</sup> Wanda Corn, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Living Modern* (New York: Delmonico Books, 2017): 42.

<sup>25</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, *Art and Letters*, 136.

<sup>26</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, “Language of Color and Form” in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1966): 47.

own quarterly journal *Camera Work* in 1912.<sup>27</sup> Both were influenced by his philosophy, but each used it to achieve different goals. She was interested in more formal concerns, consciously thinking about composition, expression and aesthetics, while he was singularly driven to promote her as the premiere female American modern artist using whatever gendered rhetoric necessary. She was interested in the process, he in the results.

With Stieglitz and his colleagues shaping the critical interpretations of her work, O'Keeffe often felt misunderstood, but did not speak publicly on the matter. Instead, she wrote to friends about how the critics made her "shiver" with a "queer feeling of being invaded."<sup>28</sup> She described this strange phenomenon to Mitchell Kennerley: "the things they write sound so strange and far removed from what I feel of myself. They make me seem like some strange sort of creature floating in the air--breathing in clouds for nourishment--when the truth is that I like beef steak--and like it rare at that."<sup>29</sup> The feminine critical interpretations assigned rarely represented how she felt about her work, but she did appreciate and connect with the rhetoric of growth prevalent with Stieglitz and his friends.<sup>30</sup> Stieglitz showed that both the men and women artists he represented had potential to mature as fine artists through investigation, sustained support and a thirst for expressing their creativity. He claims the unconscious creative spirit is "trying to live in the light, like the seed pushing up through the earth" because it "will alone have

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<sup>27</sup> Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, 12.

Sarah Whitaker Peters, *Becoming O'Keeffe: The Early Years* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 82-85.

<sup>28</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, 137.

<sup>29</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, 137.

<sup>30</sup> Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, 20.

roots, can alone be fertile.”<sup>31</sup> Critics such as Henry Tyrell adopted Stieglitz’s language of growth, likening O’Keeffe’s abstracted forms to the “germinating of a flower.”<sup>32</sup> O’Keeffe often used the growth metaphor to describe herself in letters to friends, telling Jean Toomer: “My center does not come from my mind--it feels in me like a plot of warm moist well tilled earth with the sun shining hot on it--nothing with a spark of possibility of growth seems seeded in it at the moment.”<sup>33</sup>

The descriptions of O’Keeffe’s unconscious creative potential as ripe for growth did not materialize without complications. Most critics directly linked her growth as an artist back to a sexualized view of her personally. The critic Herbert J. Seligmann describes her paintings inspired by nature, such as *From the Lake No. 1* (**fig. 1**) from 1924, as having “breastlike contour of cloud and black cleaving of lake shore from water’s reflection” which are “all things and shapes related to the body, to its identity become conscious.”<sup>34</sup> Critics tendency to make direct connections between her work and the curves of the female body angered O’Keeffe. Weary of such limited criticism, she wrote the following statement in 1923:

I grew up pretty much as everybody else grows up and one day seven years ago I found myself saying to myself--I can’t live where I want to--I can’t go where I want to--I can’t do what I want to--I can’t even say what I want to. School and things that painters have taught me even keep me from painting as I want to. I decided I was a very stupid fool not to at least paint as I wanted to and say what I wanted to when I painted as that seemed to be the only thing I could do that didn’t concern anybody but myself--that was nobody’s business but my own. So these paintings and drawings happened...I found that I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say in any other way--things that I had no words

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<sup>31</sup> Lynes 20.

<sup>32</sup> Lynes 22.

<sup>33</sup> Lynes 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> Lynes 195.

for. Some of the wise men say it is not painting, some of them say it is. Art or not Art--they disagree.<sup>35</sup>

Above all, O'Keeffe desired to share herself through form while simultaneously trying to disregard critical responses to her work, which of course, was easier said than done.

In 1923, attempting to change the narrative surrounding her work, O'Keeffe made a shift towards more representational works in which the subject could be clearly understood. She began painting fruits and her signature flowers, but much to her dismay, the sexualized interpretations persisted.<sup>36</sup> However, her desire to paint "objectively" continued, and by 1925, she aspired to paint the growing city around her. Painting the city provided an opportunity to discard her feminine pigeonhole and conquer a subject that no men had successfully painted yet, thereby establishing herself as a prominent artist, not just a "female" artist.

O'Keeffe's agency was at times limited by Stieglitz, who initially discouraged her from painting the New York City skyscrapers. He believed the endeavor risky given her past success with abstractions and floral imagery. He also saw urban subject matter as a masculine enterprise, as the city was planned and constructed by men.<sup>37</sup> However, she did not obey his initial wishes, and produced over twenty cityscapes, which she called "my New Yorks [that] would turn the world over."<sup>38</sup> In March of 1925, she asked Stieglitz to exhibit her first New York painting, *New York Street with Moon*, in a group show, but he refused (**fig. 2**). The piece did not appear until a solo show in February of 1926, where it promptly sold. She said, "no one ever objected to my painting New York

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<sup>35</sup> Lynes 67-68.

<sup>36</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, *Art and Letters*, 137.

<sup>37</sup> Corn, *The Great American Thing*, 244.

<sup>38</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, *Art and Letters*, 179.

after that.”<sup>39</sup> Dissatisfied with the critical reception of her work and desiring a change, O’Keeffe wrote to Waldo Frank that she would like to create work “so magnificently vulgar that all the people who have liked what I have been doing would stop speaking to me.”<sup>40</sup> She embraced the challenge of painting the city around her, and let the lines, shapes, and colors of the city serve as inspiration.

O’Keeffe was conflicted by life in the city and often longed to live in a rural landscape where she could more closely connect with nature. She often wrote to friends while in the city about her longing for the country, referring to “the wonderful great big sky” as an intense experience that “makes me want to breath so deep that I’ll break-- There is so much of it.”<sup>41</sup> Finding a living situation that could afford her this connection in New York City proved difficult, but she and Stieglitz scoured the city for options. In 1925, shortly after marrying, they moved onto the twenty-eighth floor of the Shelton Hotel, built from 1922 to 1923 and opened to residents in 1924, making the pair the first artists to live in a skyscraper.<sup>42</sup> The couple, and in particular O’Keeffe, enjoyed living high above the city. Stressing the hotel’s solitude, Stieglitz wrote to his friend, the writer Sherwood Anderson:

New York is madder than ever...But Georgia and I somehow don’t seem to be of New York--nor of anywhere. We live high up in the Shelton Hotel...We feel as if we were out at midocean--All is so quiet except the wind--and the trembling shaking hulk of steel in which we live--It’s a wonderful place.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Chave, “Who Will Paint New York?,” 98.

<sup>40</sup> Cowart, Hamilton, Greenough, 185.

<sup>41</sup> Cowart, Hamilton, Greenough, 155.

<sup>42</sup> Chave, “Who Will Paint New York?,” 95-97.

<sup>43</sup> Chave, 96.

While the Shelton's privacy appealed to both, O'Keeffe particularly enjoyed the direct connection she felt to nature by living above the city. Living among the clouds appealed to her, and she felt emboldened to paint the views out her window:

When I was looking for a place to live, I decided to try the Shelton. I was shown two rooms on the 30th floor. I had never lived so high before and was so excited that I began talking about trying to paint New York. Of course, I was told that it was an impossible idea--even the men hadn't done too well with it.<sup>44</sup>

Living above the city, O'Keeffe was constantly viewing New York from a uniquely modern perspective and realized the potential it had for her as an artist. She also indicates that male artists had struggled with the subject, giving her an extra push to try painting the urban landscape.

The paintings that resulted are renderings of newly constructed modern midtown Manhattan skyscrapers. Locating subjects on walks in her midtown neighborhood or from her window while residing at the Shelton, she painted the recently erected buildings, showcasing the latest trends in architecture. Since these buildings were brand new, no one had ever painted them before. The new growth surrounding her was "an endless source of interest," and to O'Keeffe, not entirely divorced from the organic structures that had been the focus of her earlier paintings. As she described the link between the origins of her flowers and cityscapes:

In the twenties, huge buildings sometimes seemed to be going up overnight in New York. At that same time I saw a painting by Fantin-Latour, a still-life with flowers I found very beautiful, but I realized that were I to paint the same flowers so small, no one would look at them because I was unknown. So I thought I'll make them big like the huge buildings going up. People will be startled; they'll *have* to look at them--and they did...At about the same time, I saw a sky shape near the Chatham Hotel where buildings were going up. It was the building that made this fine shape, so I sketched it and then painted it. This was in the early twenties and was my first New York painting. The next year I painted more New York scenes. At that time people said, "You can't paint New York; you're well launched on the flowers."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chave, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Kuh, *The Artist's Voice*, 190-191.

O’Keeffe wanted to paint the city in the same way as her flowers: inspired by forms that were big yet original, forcing people to stop and notice her work. From 1925 to 1926, about forty-five new skyscrapers were built in New York City, more than had ever been erected in such a short time frame.<sup>46</sup> The new lines reaching up towards the sky prompted O’Keeffe to paint, and the resulting work extrapolates the soaring lines made possible through modern architectural achievements. When applied to the city, her naturalist instincts and eye for composition set her work apart from her contemporaries. The urban landscapes were popular with buyers and deprived critics of gendered ammunition, establishing her as a preeminent modern American artist.

One of her earliest urban pieces from 1926, *City Night*, showcases her fascination with geometric forms created by the skyscrapers (**fig. 3**). Stressing the upward thrust of the new American skyline, O’Keeffe stated: “I think New York is wonderful--it’s like a dream. It always makes European cities look like villages to me. I think of a city going up, don’t you? Well it has to go up to the sky.”<sup>47</sup> In *City Night*, massive black and gray buildings extend towards a pure blue sky. Windows and other extraneous details have been eliminated, leaving behind what Jonathan Weinberg has described as “minimalist slabs.”<sup>48</sup> By contrasting monolithic structures with the spherical moon, O’Keeffe’s nocturnal scene feels mythical and imposing, forcing the viewer to look up at cavernous black walls in search of a celestial light. The man-made formations extend beyond the picture plane, inducing claustrophobia, relaying the experience of

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<sup>46</sup> Peters, *Becoming O’Keeffe*, 279.

<sup>47</sup> *Georgia O’Keeffe*, directed by Perry Miller Adato (1977: Skokie, Il., Films, Inc., 1977), Film.

<sup>48</sup> Weinberg, “Woman Without Men,” 111.

walking the streets newly bursting with massive architecture. Based on this viewpoint, the tilt produces a sense of disorientation and make the buildings imposing while also dwarfing the viewer. By proxy, she invites viewers to walk the avenues of midtown Manhattan, experiencing the development and growth for themselves in the form of cavernous architectural marvels. The experience is also personal, as O’Keeffe was constantly inspired by forms surrounding her on walks through the midtown neighborhood, her dedication to lines and shapes on display in her paintings.

O’Keeffe further experimented with these urban landscapes, adding a layer of subtle complexity, partly derived from experimentation with portraiture at the time, Many of her contemporaries in New York made portraits, both abstract and realistic, in which an image or object stands in for a person, relaying information about an individual without relying on conventional likeness. The symbolic images, often clever and humorous, are meant to be studied and unpacked. This abstracted mode of portraiture has been described in varying terms by scholars, including “referential” by Wanda Corn and “experimental” and “emblematic” by Vivien Green Fryd.<sup>49</sup> This style of portraiture was popular with the Stieglitz circle and New York City avant-garde of which O’Keeffe was a part, and she may have subtly integrated some of these ideas into aspects into her work.

O’Keeffe’s city paintings have been linked to this playful mode of artmaking. Fryd identifies the painting *Radiator Building--Night, New York (fig. 4)* from 1927 as an emblematic portrait of Stieglitz.<sup>50</sup> New York’s glitzy, art-deco masterpiece, the Radiator Building, is central, set against a nocturnal view of midtown Manhattan. The gilded top functions as a crown, marking New York as the center of modernity. The building stands

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<sup>49</sup> Corn, *The Great American Thing*, 203, Fryd, “Radiator Building,” 270.

<sup>50</sup> Fryd, 277-278.

high above its neighbors, radiating light from its apex. The work is flat and linear. The tower is flanked on either side: to the left is a red sign, and on the right, wafts of smoke vent from a roof. The red blurred sign, reading “ALFRED STIEGLITZ,” replaces the actual marquee that simply read “Scientific American.” The color red is often associated with power and ambition. O’Keeffe, well versed in Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, also infused the scene with the Russian artist’s identification of red as a color with “almost tenacious immense power ... [that] arouses feeling of strength, energy, ambition, determination.”<sup>51</sup> With direct references to character, the red signage symbolizes Stieglitz, both in power and spirit. Fryd argues, “this image ironically proclaimed her husband as the modern man of commerce, the scientific American who embodied contradictions between his repeated and insistent protests against the commercialization of art and his actions in selling works of art for profit.”<sup>52</sup> Stieglitz claimed to detest the commercialization of the arts. He did not support museums or the wealthy families that commanded the art world and likened their work to prostitution. Ironically, he participated in the same activities within his own galleries by selling works by the artists he supported so they could continue producing art and living comfortably.<sup>53</sup> He demanded large sums of money for their art because he wanted his artists to get the value he thought, whether realistic or inflated, they were worth.

Details such as the wafting smoke, bright spotlights, and O’Keeffe’s choice to paint the gilded top of the Radiator Building white rather than a sparkling gold also link back to Stieglitz. **(fig. 5)**. I believe there are many references to both Stieglitz and

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<sup>51</sup> Fryd, 277

<sup>52</sup> Fryd, 278.

<sup>53</sup> Fryd, 277.

O’Keeffe in this painting that have gone unnoticed by scholars. For example, O’Keeffe makes the white cascade more pronounced than the actual building, calling to mind Stieglitz’s trademark floppy white hair, as seen in this portrait of an aging Stieglitz by the photographer Imogen Cunningham (**fig. 6**). In her painting, the Radiator Building splits the canvas in two, leaving the left side with its fluorescent signage as an indication of Stieglitz. The wispy smoke on the right-hand side of the canvas connects to O’Keeffe. The greenish-blue hued smoke wafts up to join the spotlight and together they reach for the sky. O’Keeffe was enamored with the sky, and when stuck in the city for long periods of time, she would write to friends, with a simple request, such as “kiss the sky for me” or send “my greetings to the sky.”<sup>54</sup> When paired next to the red advertisement blazing in the dark, the weightless, organic form represents O’Keeffe’s true spirit. The pair was opposites in many respects: Stieglitz, a powerful and influential extrovert who always spoke his mind complemented O’Keeffe’s reserved and intuitive nature. She has even spoken of herself as the country to his city.<sup>55</sup> O’Keeffe wrote, “I feel like a little plant that he has watered and weeded and dug around--and he seems to have been able to grow himself--without anyone watering or weeding or digging around him.”<sup>56</sup> She needed the spotlight shone on her to continue to grow and flourish as an artist, while he worked hard to establish and create his own place in the art world.

The painting also serves as an examination of New York’s rapid urbanization. In the bottom right corner, we see a lone brownstone tenement building. The building is unlit, as if to indicate its time has passed, marked for ruination. The brownstone is inevitably fated to be torn down and replaced by a monstrous center of commerce.

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<sup>54</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, *Art and Letters*, 180-210.

<sup>55</sup> *Georgia O’Keeffe*, dir. by Adato.

<sup>56</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, 183.

Through this juxtaposition, O’Keeffe highlights her keen sense of the fleeting nature of time as well as her aspiration to express the city as swift organic growth. In this image, she records the change witnessed before her own eyes. The Radiator, designed by Raymond M. Hood and constructed in 1924, is a recent addition to the midtown skyline in 1927, the year the painting was completed.<sup>57</sup> The building itself resembles a radiator, thus producing a fluidity between everyday object and architectural structure. O’Keeffe witnessed the Radiator Building arise before her eyes in the City, adding another modern element to an increasingly altered midtown skyline. While the brownstone has stood much longer than the glitzy and glamorous buildings surrounding it, the viewer knows the structure’s future remains unclear.

Inspired by glimpses of the natural world that she could find in the city, O’Keeffe began to experiment with organic forms in her urban landscapes. In 1926, O’Keeffe painted a cityscape with the Shelton Hotel as her subject. She recalled passing the structure on an misty day to see that “the sun was biting a piece out of the tower and your eye will see sunspots if you look hard enough at anything sometimes. I looked hard at it and the sunspots were partially on the sky and some were on the building.”<sup>58</sup> Titled *The Shelton With Sunspots*, the painting’s perspective looks up at her home from a low vantage point on the street (**fig. 7**). The viewer cannot see the street level and is instead left to ponder the architecture and the sky above and surrounding the Shelton. The painting is void of human figures, but life is still ever present through the sun as well as the architecture created and inhabited by man. Wafting smoke-like waves and yellow and orange sun spots punctuate the space, surrounding the structure and enveloping the scene in a warm glow. Most of the picture is flat and symmetrical, painted with

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<sup>57</sup> Fryd, “Radiator Building,” 269.

<sup>58</sup> *Georgia O’Keeffe*, dir. by Adato.

precise detail, highlighting the linearity of the urban landscape. The sun interrupts the line created by the Shelton, dissolving into an organic form, leaving traces of its presence throughout the painting as billowing steam and circular spots. Despite man's powerful creations, nature itself still exerts strong forces. The upward rectangular architectural forms contrasted with the spots and steam further juxtaposes the urban and natural. Yet, the painting is not meant to serve as documentation of a time and place. As with her Radiator Building, O'Keeffe did not paint every window or architectural detail faithfully, but instead, said "you paint *from* your subject, not what you see...I rarely paint anything I don't know very well."<sup>59</sup>

O'Keeffe cleverly makes the sun our focal point, not the architecture. The building is eclipsed by the sun, darkening its facade. The scene is both sublime and menacing, as the organic waves buttress the architectural centerpiece. This scene differs from her painting of the Radiator Building by presenting a different balance between the natural and manmade. In *Radiator Building--Night, New York*, the wisp of smoke is minimized, but here, it dominates. By placing nature in harmony with the skyscraper, she is painting her alternate reality. Unafraid to make the scene visually appealing and "pretty," she at the same time confronts the realities of rapid urban growth. What takes precedence -- urbanity or nature? With her title, *The Shelton with Sunspots*, O'Keeffe marries the two together. When in the city for long periods, O'Keeffe felt the call of the natural world and longed to be among trees, water, and mountains. In 1930, she wrote to Dorothy Brett, "the Mountain calls one and the desert--and the sagebrush--the country seems to call one in a way that one has to answer it."<sup>60</sup> Residing

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<sup>59</sup> Kuh, *The Artist's Voice*, 200.

<sup>60</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, *Art and Letters*, 200.

high above the city could not replace life in the country, but it could instill in her some of the same feelings as living among nature.

Utilizing New York City's urban landscape as subject matter was historically a masculine endeavor. Only a few men, such as Abraham Walkowitz and Joseph Stella, had attempted to paint the city by the 1920s, and they did so by borrowing the visual language of European Cubism and Futurism.<sup>61</sup> Stieglitz circle artists including John Marin and Charles Sheeler had also used the city as subject, but approached the city through abstract watercolors and Precisionist lines respectively. As an American who had never been abroad, O'Keeffe approached the subject unattached to European modes of interpretation. She was inspired by form, and felt called to paint the city because of her unique vantage point above the streets. In 1928 she told a critic her view provided artistic inspiration: "I realize it's unusual for an artist to work way up near the roof of a big hotel in the heart of a roaring city, but I think that's just what the artist of today needs for stimulus. He has to have a place where he can behold the city as a unit before his eyes."<sup>62</sup> New York was indeed seen by many as inherently masculine. Skyscrapers were designed and built by men, and the structures recalled phallic images. Anna C. Chave points out that "rendering the city meant taking the kind of commanding perspective that men alone were ordinarily socialized to assume, because men controlled the civic space."<sup>63</sup> Women were not encouraged to travel in public alone, lest

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<sup>61</sup> Chave, "Who Will Paint New York?," 90.

<sup>62</sup> Chave, 98.

<sup>63</sup> Chave, 97.

they attract unwanted male attention.<sup>64</sup> By painting the skyscrapers, O'Keeffe tested the belief that only men could properly render the urban landscape.

*The Shelton With Sunspots* also utilizes an understated mode of referential portraiture. The sun flare, situated near the top floors where O'Keeffe and Stieglitz resided, is quietly empowering. The flare's explosive power rocks the scene, spreading its effects over the city while concurrently embracing the building in a warm, halo-like ring. The battling themes and forces within the painting represent O'Keeffe's own conflicting views of city life. The sunspot on the Shelton boldly symbolizes her connection to nature, metaphorically showing she is the light that the growing, male-dominated art world needs. She is taking a fearless and audacious stance, insisting those clever enough to understand her symbolism to take seriously her artistic powers. This is of course a position easier made symbolically than explicitly, as the male dominated art world often limited her agency, assigning sexual meaning to most of her work. Knowing her limits, she creates a referential self-portrait that speaks to her struggles as well as her triumphs as a female artist. She is demonstrating her proficiency by painting the modern metropolis, thereby challenging her assigned role as a female artist who has been told not to paint the city. By instilling the work with competing notions of urbanism and the natural world, she places her ingenuity on display for the astute to decipher.

Paired together, *Radiator Building--New York, Night* and *The Shelton with Sunspots* can be seen as an analogous duo. Both serve as referential portraits of Stieglitz and O'Keeffe, making the pairing into a non-traditional wedding portrait. The Radiator Building illuminates the nocturnal skyline, signaling its importance to modern New York. Both the building and the man it symbolizes are integral to New York's future

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<sup>64</sup> Fryd, "Radiator Building," 281.

development. The Shelton stands amidst the commotion, bathed in light, taking the focus off the architecture and onto the glory of nature. The painting presents beauty in an urban environment, highlighting the grand interaction between man and nature. O'Keeffe is like the Shelton, a perfect combination of city and sky. The architecture of the Shelton can also serve as a reference to Stieglitz as well as the male artists who portray the city -- as nature dissolves the architecture, O'Keeffe's approach to depicting it challenges the male representations and identifications with the skyscraper. When placed side by side, a symbiotic relationship is certainly visible.

As she continues to explore this topic, rather than creating art that reflects her personal relationship to the growing city around her, she begins to paint the dichotomy between mankind, the natural world and the city. Juxtaposing the industrial and natural proved a persistent theme during the years O'Keeffe spent living and working in New York. O'Keeffe sets up this contrast in her first New York cityscape *Untitled (New York Street With Moon)* (**fig. 1**) from 1925. The viewer looks up from a low vantage point as a yellow-orange sky morphs into night. Three light sources are present: a red stoplight, a white dangling streetlamp, and a moon partially concealed by a cloud. Our eye bounces between each source of light, struggling to commit. The halo-like ring around the streetlamp has an appealing, celestial glow, so in this time and place, has the man-made succeeded nature? The cityscapes painted after *Radiator Building--Night, New York* and *The Shelton with Sunspots* explore the city's evolving relationship between nature and manmade and its trend toward artificiality.

O'Keeffe also paints the commotion and bustle of 1920s New York, transforming chaos into form. The panoramic depiction of the East River in the 1928 painting *East River from the 30th Story of the Shelton Hotel* (**fig. 8**) highlights the density of the city, even at the edge of water. Uniform industrial buildings and smokestacks

envelop almost every part of the surface except for the blue streak of water. The river, unlike its surrounding buildings, is calm and settled. In *New York, Night* (**fig. 9**), miniscule streets are dotted with hundreds of lights, but our eye is drawn to the floral-shaped blue window. Amongst cars, people and industry, the symbols of nature are always present. These motifs act to complicate the meaning of urban landscapes, adding complex layers of imagery that point to the power the natural world has over all of humanity.

Stylistically, *New York, Night* varies from her other cityscapes because she was painting a view from her window at the Shelton, trying to capture the life and commotion on the street so far below her. The viewer looks down on the scene with fully illuminated streets of cars, headlights lighting their way. The avenue splits the canvas diagonally. This particular scene is more intimate than many of her other paintings. The treatment of the windows is detailed, and the viewer can actually see into the space, giving us a sense of the presence of life within the tall skyscrapers. Likewise, we know people are making the cars move. She said looking down at the street traffic from her high view made the streets “look like tall, thin bottles.”<sup>65</sup> From her high perch, she sees the chaos as line and shape. Once again inspired by form, she deconstructs the city in a way no artist has, creating a welcoming view that radiates liveliness without actually depicting any human forms.

O’Keeffe’s efforts to paint the city culminated in the 1932 painting *Manhattan* (**fig. 10**). Originally commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York for a 1932 exhibition entitled *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, artists were asked to create designs that could be transferred into large scale decorative murals. O’Keeffe envisioned a triptych for the project, and *Manhattan* served as the middle panel (**fig.**

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<sup>65</sup> *Georgia O’Keeffe*, dir. by Adato.

11).<sup>66</sup> Mural commissions were abundant in New York in the early 1930s, and O’Keeffe wanted the opportunity to share her work on such a large and public scale. In 1929, she wrote a friend: “I have such a desire to paint something for a particular place--and paint it *big*.”<sup>67</sup> The painting attracted the attention of Donald Deskey, the man responsible for decorating the newly constructed Radio City Music Hall. O’Keeffe accepted Deskey’s offer of fifteen hundred dollars to decorate a woman’s lounge in the hall without Stieglitz’s consent. When Stieglitz discovered the commission, he was furious. Believing O’Keeffe to be worth much more than the amount offered her, he unsuccessfully tried to raise her fee. Without the endorsement of her husband, O’Keeffe carried on with the commission at the original price offered. However, when it came time to paint the mural in the Ladies Powder room, the plaster was still wet so she could not paint the mural. Citing a “nervous breakdown,” Stieglitz called Deskey and said O’Keeffe needed to be released from her contract.<sup>68</sup>

Although the mural project was never fully realized, the preparatory piece marks a significant stylistic departure from her previous cityscapes. O’Keeffe uses a new color palette and a new artistic language, pairing shades of pink, red and bright blue with more neutral brown, black and white. With jazz-age and Art Deco sensibility, the piece appears celebratory and triumphant, full of elongated forms reaching towards the top of the picture plane. A cubist-informed arrangement of slanting and tilting rectangles are punctuated by four triangular segments piercing towards the left. Ziggurat-like brown steps lean against a singular, translucent pale pink point. Blocks of blue fill in between canyons, forcing the viewer to question where architecture ends and sky begins. Three

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<sup>66</sup> Wanda Corn, “Painting Big--O’Keeffe’s *Manhattan*” *American Art* 20, no. 2 (2006): 22.

<sup>67</sup> Corn, “Painting Big,” 22.

<sup>68</sup> Weinberg, “Women Without Men,” 113.

mystical, floating flowers suspend over the entire scene. She creates a vision of the city unbound by a particular artistic movement but forged from her own mind, infusing the buildings with a spirited attitude. Perhaps most impressive is the fact she accomplishes this without any human figures that could emotionally draw the viewer into the scene.

With *Manhattan*, O’Keeffe was not depicting a specific building or intersection; rather, her title indicates the work attempts to capture the spirit of the city as a whole. The forms are not recognizable landmarks. By cropping out many of the small brownstones as well as the street level and focusing instead of abstracting skyscrapers, O’Keeffe stakes her claim and exercises her right to adopt the city’s state-of-the-art modern buildings as subject. She once again interprets the city as line, shape and color, deconstructing the urban landscape and treating her surroundings as forms meant to be rearranged. In 1932, O’Keeffe wrote to Dorothy Brett: “We have wild strange ways in building our mad buildings in N.Y. and my kind of work is maybe a bit tender for what it has to stand in that sort of a world.”<sup>69</sup> The “mad buildings” she writes of could refer not only to the new and intriguing lines and shapes created by the skyscrapers, but also the overwhelming onslaught of new buildings in Manhattan, springing up from the ground and altering her surroundings.

As in her previous work, *Manhattan* calls to mind the effects of explosive growth in the city. While the tilting, uneven abstracted skyscrapers can be understood as infused with jazzy energy, they also appear to be chaotic. Celebrating the city’s modern spirit and progress, the painting alerts the viewer to the fact that the city grows like an organism in a random fashion. The confusing blue blocks on the painting show the city as subsuming the sky. In previous city paintings, O’Keeffe clearly delineates the border between manmade structure and sky. In *Manhattan*, she blends the two together. The

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<sup>69</sup> Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, *Art and Letters*, 207.

buildings grow taller, slowly eating away at any leftover blue space. As more buildings are added to the ever growing skyline, less sky will be available.

This painting marks the first and only time O’Keeffe mixed florals with city architecture, as well as the final time she painted Manhattan skyscrapers. Instead of continuing to paint the city as metaphoric growth, she ceases subtlety by adding floral motifs around the skyscrapers. O’Keeffe chose to paint man-made posies rather than her signature lilies, irises, and petunias. The flowers she paints are modeled after paper and cloth posies created by Hispanic women she found during travels in New Mexico.<sup>70</sup> In *Manhattan*, O’Keeffe scatters three blue, pink and red posies around the outer portions of the composition so as not to invade the space of the dominant, central forms. The flowers are unexpected, since florals had not yet made an appearance in this realm of her oeuvre. They seem to float peacefully over the city. Wanda Corn has argued that “the flowers were her personal signature, a self-conscious, autobiographical claim to a subject and to a scale of painting that had long been male territory.”<sup>71</sup> By pairing flowers with skyscrapers, O’Keeffe plays with gendered visual language, adding symbols that are unapologetically feminine and thereby testing critical response. By introducing man- (or more accurately) woman-made flowers into a cityscape, she marks the painting as her own gendered insertion into and claim upon a traditionally male domain: the construction of the city and representations of it. The scene is so pleasant, yet modern, the viewer can momentarily forget the flowers are fake and suspended in an artificially constructed urban world, and yet, she seems to make a statement that the flowers are no more artificial than the constructed buildings they surround. The skyscrapers are rooted, while the flowers are not, altering and alternating with reality. *Manhattan* serves

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<sup>70</sup> Corn, “Painting Big,” 24.

<sup>71</sup> Corn, “Painting Big,” 25.

as a fitting culmination to her painted exploration of the city. By 1932, artificiality subsumed nature, and O’Keeffe’s motivation to paint the city was exhausted.

After the disappointment of this commission, O’Keeffe turned her attention more towards scenes depicting various natural elements of the Southwest. In 1929, she began spending summers in New Mexico, withdrawing from both New York City and Stieglitz.<sup>72</sup> Leaving the city as subject behind, she once again sought inspiration in pure nature, free from urban influences and confines. Replacing cityscapes with bleached desert bones, the Southwestern deserts became her new muse, stimulating more modern incarnations of line and shape. However, her exploration of the urban landscape proved a crucial step in her development as a modern artist. O’Keeffe painted the city as an inquiry of urban space and how urbanism can function like an organism of growth. Cities have natural life cycles that mimic the rhythms of the flora and fauna she was so fond of painting. Over the course of her years residing in New York, she watched the city bloom, just like a flower. Her paintings of the city period demonstrate the inspiration the monumental buildings had on her way of seeing the world and how she translated the world into and through form. Throughout her career, O’Keeffe was steadfast in her devotion to simple lines, shapes, and colors, but what changed was her subject matter. And by 1932, O’Keeffe was ready for a change.

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<sup>72</sup> Corn, *The Great American Thing*, 245.

## CHAPTER 3

### FLORINE STETTHEIMER: SPIRITED CITYSCAPES

In a touching unpublished eulogy written upon the death of Florine Stettheimer in 1944, Georgia O’Keeffe described her friend’s work as: “Fantasy and reality all mixed up. She was perfectly consistent with any of her inconsistencies.”<sup>73</sup> Though O’Keeffe framed this inconsistency as a trait she admired, Stettheimer’s work was often criticized, both during her life and by later scholars, as striking an uneven balance between seemingly opposite tendencies. Stettheimer was a keen observer of modern life in all its intricacies, painted in a vibrant and idiosyncratic style that was often deemed too feminine and colorful, resulting in the public flippantly dismissing her work, and being unwilling or unable to dissect the personal, vivid paintings. Her depictions of modern urban life are particularly complex: experiential and bright, full of architectural and floral iconography. Unlike her friend O’Keeffe, Stettheimer had no desire to dedicate her artistic practice to non-figurative work, but instead made creations centered on elongated and elegant humans thriving in the modern era. Mingling with architectural details and florals, her work places fashion and art on parade. Nowhere is this more evident than her city scenes, which offer a carefully contrived and idealized representation of the modern city. In the paintings discussed, she highlights New York City’s skyscrapers -- they stand heroic yet removed, reflecting her own life as an outsider who would rather observe than participate. Stettheimer, a dedicated poet, recorded her written musings on the modern city with humor. As an observer of the world around her, she was sharp in her words and work, using her art wryly to critique social, gender, and cultural norms.

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<sup>73</sup> Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo, “Wrapped in Cellophane: Florine Stettheimer’s Visual Poetics,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011): 14.

Like O’Keeffe, Stettheimer and her work have often been misunderstood due to her use of feminine motifs, colors, and subject matter. According to Barbara Bloemink, since Stettheimer’s death, her work has been overlooked by scholars since her artistic output did not fit the dominant definition of modernist painting as abstraction championed by many of her contemporaries.<sup>74</sup> As a woman “consistent in her inconsistencies,” Stettheimer was an artist who created her own style of painting and living and unabashedly stuck with it. She did not let the New York avant-garde scene, the art market, or any other outside factors dictate her choices. After one less than satisfactory experiment with public exhibition, she focused on making work to please herself and her exclusive peer group of art world and society insiders. Her professional strategy greatly differed from O’Keeffe -- whereas O’Keeffe tested the visible lines of symbolizing gender in order to change how she was perceived by her male peers in the art world, Stettheimer, whose most intimate circle consisted of her sisters and mother, unapologetically celebrated femininity, infusing her urban scenes with surprising details such as florals. Unlike O’Keeffe’s use of flowers however, Stettheimer strips flowers of their gendered readings, and instead paints vibrant bouquets celebratory of modern life. While O’Keeffe’s use of flowers resulted from a frustration with the gendered critical readings of her work, Stettheimer’s florals amplify that which is already feminine, taking flowers out of their traditional still life setting and injecting them with a modern sensibility that speaks to her experience as an independent woman in early twentieth-century New York City.

Stettheimer layers her work with complex notions of wit and humor. In her seminal article “Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive,” Linda Nochlin applies the term “camp sensibility,” coined by Susan Sontag, to Stettheimer’s work. This concept involves

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<sup>74</sup> Barbara J. Bloemink, “Visualizing Sight: Florine Stettheimer and Temporal Modernism”, in *Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1995): 70.

“seeing the world in terms of a degree of artifice, of stylization,” which Nochlin argues has “an actively subversive component inherent to camp sensibility itself. This subversiveness may be quite validly viewed as a social or political commitment in its own right.”<sup>75</sup> At first glance, Stettheimer’s art appears frilly, feminine, and hyperbolic; a closer look garners a heavily constructed style meant to subvert cultural, political and social norms, all the while masked with wit. Susan Fillen-Yeh points out that “Stettheimer played with ultra-feminine tropes as if with masks, revamping the clichés of the feminine: jewels, flounces, lace.”<sup>76</sup> Perhaps Stettheimer intended to prod her elite audience of avant-garde viewers into deep thought through a mixture of paintings and words. In this way, she differs from O’Keeffe. Stettheimer, and even O’Keeffe in her referential portraits, wanted to create a puzzle to be solved by those astute enough to decipher it. While O’Keeffe took a visceral approach to her work, letting natural and man-made forms trigger her imagination, Stettheimer painted with her head. While O’Keeffe despised being labeled as a woman artist and distanced herself from critics that gendered her work, Stettheimer does not shy away from the explicitly feminine. In fact, Stettheimer embraces graceful frills, ladylike cocktail dresses and delicate bouquets. However, Stettheimer was intent on contemporary social critique, using her signature theatrical and campy style for satirical commentary.

Born into a wealthy Jewish family in Rochester, New York in 1871, Stettheimer grew up extremely comfortable. Her father, Joseph, abandoned his wife, Rosetta, and their five young children, but luckily Rosetta had money of her own, and the family

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<sup>75</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive,” In *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015): 136-137.

<sup>76</sup> Susan Fillen-Yeh, “Dandies, Marginality and Modernism: Georgia O’Keeffe, Marcel Duchamp and Other Cross-Dressers,” *Oxford Art Journal* 18, no. 2 (1995): 41.

continued to live in financial security.<sup>77</sup> As a result, Florine traveled extensively between the United States and Europe throughout her childhood. As a young woman, she first studied art at the Art Students' League in New York City from 1892 to 1895. Her early artistic training was fairly conventional. In a poem written during this time period, she outlines some of her critiques:

Art Student days in New York  
Streets of stoop houses all alike  
People dressed sedately  
Bright colors considered loud  
Jewels shoddy--  
I affected empire gowns.<sup>78</sup>

From an early age, Stettheimer was hyper-aware of the rigid formalities that characterized Gilded Age art and culture, perhaps foreshadowing her later perceptively provocative works.

Stettheimer lived a life of great wealth and privilege, and was lucky enough to live abroad in Europe with her mother and sisters for much of her twenties and thirties. She received more artistic training abroad in Berlin, Munich and Stuttgart in 1906, and held studios throughout Europe over the next several years.<sup>79</sup> Her travels afforded the opportunity to see work by the great avant-garde European artists as it was unveiled to the public, which led to the discovery of not only the Impressionists and Symbolists but also Russian ballet and Rococo design.<sup>80</sup> Her early work show both high- and low-brow artistic influences as she struggled to develop her personal style throughout her thirties,

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<sup>77</sup> Barbara J. Bloemink, *The Art and Life of Florine Stettheimer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995): 6.

<sup>78</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, "Florine Stettheimer: A 1990s Perspective," In *Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1995): 43.

<sup>80</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 20.

and many of her early paintings mimicked Post Impressionism. When she was in her early forties, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 forced the family back to New York once and for all.

With this independent and self-determined upbringing, Stettheimer was in many ways the ultimate “New Woman.” She never married and had no need to rely on men for financial or artistic support, and she lived in a family dominated by strong female figures. For most of her New York life, she lived on the Upper West Side with her sisters Carrie, Ettie, and their mother, Rosetta. Although all three daughters engaged in flirtations, none ever committed or left the home the four shared. Additionally, Stettheimer’s artistic life was both private and advantaged, affording her the opportunity to control when and how her art was shown. Likewise, her mother and sisters enjoyed similar freedoms. As a strong matriarch and single parent, Rosetta imbued her daughters with a great sense of self, encouraging them to attain academic training at a time when women generally did not seek degrees and were not welcome in places of higher learning.<sup>81</sup> Because of their mother’s progressive views, Ettie, a philosopher and novelist with a doctorate degree, wrote fiction under the pseudonym “Henrie Waste,” penning stories with feminist protagonists. Carrie, a natural hostess, spent her life in New York meticulously crafting a doll house recreation of the Stettheimer residence, complete with a miniature version of the notorious *Nude Descending a Staircase* made by Marcel Duchamp himself.<sup>82</sup> The four women supported each other’s ambitions in the absence of a father figure, and not only survived but thrived without a male influence.

One driving factor for Stettheimer’s return to New York was the prospect of staging a one-woman exhibition. While living abroad, Stettheimer was contacted by the

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<sup>81</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 11-12.

<sup>82</sup> Nochlin, “Rococo Subversive,” 133-34.

artist Albert Sterner, a client of the M. Knoedler and Company gallery in New York City, who asked if she was interested in a solo exhibition. Plans proceeded, but Stettheimer was unhappy with owner Roland Knoedler's seeming lack of interest in her work. "He permitted it!! And took no interest as if we were two children and might as well amuse ourselves...possibly he thinks nobody will see the show...It's certainly of no importance to them whether I have an X [exhibition] or not."<sup>83</sup> In October of 1916, the exhibition opened to the public. It included twelve paintings, complete with portraits and five floral still-lives. *Family Portrait I* (**fig. 12**) from 1915 was one of the paintings on display in her initial solo exhibition at M. Knoedler and Company. The painting contains the artist, her two sisters Ettie and Carrie, and mother Rosetta sitting around a table covered in fruits and flowers. They are seated outside surrounded by more floral and faunal motifs of branches and a parasol decorated with butterfly images. They seem calm, though perhaps wistful and mildly attentive in differing ways: two sisters interact in apparent conversation, one adjusts the bouquet on the table, and the mother reads, showing that the family is close, but each engages in their own interests. Stettheimer's thick impasto strokes and use of color recall works she would have seen in Paris by Paul Cézanne. Stettheimer also decorated the exhibit to look like her bedroom at home, covering the walls in muslin and adding a cellophane canopy to the wall.<sup>84</sup>

Despite her best efforts, many critics reviewed the show unfavorably, noting that the style appeared borrowed and the arrangement of figures felt traditional and uninspired. A reviewer from the *New York Evening Post* thought the exhibition cacophonous, comparing her work to how "an orchestra sounds when all the instruments

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<sup>83</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 71.

<sup>84</sup> Bloemink, 73-74.

are playing independently.”<sup>85</sup> Another critic uncharitably wrote that the “paintings are properly secluded in one of the upper rooms in Knoedler’s where the glare of publicity is not too strong for their modest art constitutions.”<sup>86</sup> Not all reviews were quite so negative. The *New York Times*, perhaps recognizing camp elements in their infancy, noted that her work was “very modern as to color, not without weakness in construction and design, filled with a pleasant sense of humor and fantasy.”<sup>87</sup> Much to Stettheimer’s disappointment, no work sold by the end of the exhibition, and the overall experience left her bitter. Her friend, the critic Henry McBride, later pointed out that “this was early in her career, before her style had crystallized.”<sup>88</sup> But nonetheless, she never again or held a public solo exhibition, and instead began to show her work privately at her home where she could control all factors surrounding her artistic output and display.

In 1917, a marked shift occurred in Stettheimer’s style. Perhaps her return to New York City afforded her more time to paint experimentally, or the disappointment of her one-woman show sparked a desire to reinvent her artistic practice. Whatever the circumstances, she shortly afterward abandoned the heavy-handed post-impressionistic and expressionistic influence evident in paintings such as *Family Portrait I* in favor of works that distance the viewer from the scene, showing brightly hued and full profiled, elongated and androgynous figures enthusiastically interacting within their environments. Drawing some inspiration from fashion illustration and cartoons, Stettheimer’s slender figures are also poised and sophisticated.

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<sup>85</sup> Bloemink, 74.

<sup>86</sup> Bloemink, 74.

<sup>87</sup> Bloemink, 74.

<sup>88</sup> Bloemink, 76.

Stettheimer's new style corresponded not only with her recent investment in New York City, but also with her luxurious and intellectual lifestyle. Paintings such as *Soirée/Studio Party* (fig. 13) from 1917-19 would have been on display at a Stettheimer Salon party. In this image, she confidently displays her new approach, dynamically grouping full-length figures and altering her color palette to include bright shades with emphatic uses of yellow and pinkish-red. *Soiree/Studio Party* showcases how the Stettheimer house served as a French-style Salon--American artists, writers, and critics as well as expatriates met to converse and share ideas on art, literature and philosophy, and Stettheimer took the opportunity to place her new works on view for close friends. Frequent guests included artists Marcel Duchamp and Elie Nadelman, dancer Adolph Bolm, critics Carl Van Vechten and Henry McBride, writer Sherwood Anderson, and members of the Stieglitz circle, including Charles Demuth, Alfred Stieglitz, and O'Keeffe. The Stettheimer Salon rooms were eclectic: Florine's colorful paintings scattered about the walls with fashionable, gilded furniture carefully placed between.<sup>89</sup> In the painting, five bouquets can be seen: some are propped in vases, while others are held by various women throughout the room. The elegant and ladylike interior set a sophisticated tone for all in attendance, and the Stettheimer sisters charmed with their conversation and sartorial choices. The salons and their numerous culturally engaged attendees certainly influenced Stettheimer's new and idiosyncratic style, as the conversations on art and opportunities for organic critiques of her work would have led her to ponder the direction of her work.

As Stettheimer revamped her figural style, she also began to incorporate more architectural iconography into her work. Like O'Keeffe and Abbott, the development towards a mature modernist style occurred through engagement with the city. In *New*

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<sup>89</sup> Sussman, "A 1990s Perspective," 44-45.

*York/Liberty* (fig. 14) from 1918-20, Stettheimer embraces the challenge of painting the lower Manhattan skyline. In September of 1914, returning from Europe, she and her sisters sailed by the Statue of Liberty, and Stettheimer memorialized the experience in a poem:

New York  
At last grown young  
with noise  
and color  
and light  
and jazz  
dance marathons and poultry shows  
soulsavings and rodeos  
gabfests and beauty contests  
sky towers and bridal bowers  
speakeasy bars and motor cars  
columnists and movie stars.<sup>90</sup>

Her words encapsulate a new and vibrant New York, one that had left the Gilded Age behind and embraced the modern age. Stettheimer was newly invigorated and, like O’Keeffe, inspired to paint New York in all its jazz-age glory.

*New York/Liberty* is a complex work, full of references to New York City’s past, present, and future, all set against a highly stylized architectural backdrop. Although the painting appears superficially patriotic, unpacking the narrative and symbols in the foreground shows that Stettheimer acknowledges the country’s faults, such as historic injustices against Native Americans, while also celebrating its triumphs in capitalism and social progress. In the central foreground, the state seal of New York reads the date and title of the work, flanked by a Dutch sailor on the left and a Native American on the right, referencing the city’s origins. In the right foreground, President Woodrow Wilson sits upon a battleship behind a podium in the act of delivering a speech. Bloemink points out that the work was created to honor Wilson’s visit to the International Peace Conference

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<sup>90</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 51.

held in Paris.<sup>91</sup> The United States' entry into World War I in January of 1917 certainly explains the addition of many wartime technologies, including various ships and planes. The patriotic color palette of red, white, and blue coupled with the many martial references show New York City's mobilization efforts. Florine and her family were deeply invested in the efforts at home: her nephew, Walter, was sent abroad to serve on behalf of the United States Air Force, and she and her sisters volunteered for the Red Cross and attended meetings on how to support the Allied forces.<sup>92</sup>

Lady Liberty's prominence in the painting can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Placed on the lower left corner, her gold shimmer immediately catches the viewer's eye. Stettheimer painted her in relief with gilded plaster, so that the sculptural figure actually rises off the surface of the canvas. She stands tall as a symbol of liberty for all those coming or, like Stettheimer, returning to New York by water. On December 2, 1916, after a long fundraising campaign, the torch was re-illuminated by President Wilson. She became a motivational and powerful symbol to the American war effort, used to recruit soldiers and remind citizens of their defense of democratic principles.<sup>93</sup> One small red individual stands at her base. Bloemink proposes that the small figure could be a self-portrait, as Stettheimer often liked to paint herself in red ensembles.<sup>94</sup> Lady Liberty, a recurring motif in Stettheimer's paintings, certainly held deep personal significance for the artist. In 1914, Stettheimer returned to New York as a forty-three year old women who had spent the past two decades exploring all facets of European arts and culture.

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<sup>91</sup> Bloemink, 52.

<sup>92</sup> Barbara J. Bloemink, "Imagine the Fun."

<sup>93</sup> Barbara J. Bloemink, "Imagine the Fun."

<sup>94</sup> Barbara J. Bloemink, "Visualizing Sight," 72.

Upon her return to New York, the modern city served as an inspiration. Stettheimer, acutely aware of the changes that had occurred in New York since her last stay, recorded the metamorphosis in her own words:

Then back to New York  
And skytowers had begun to grow  
And front stoop houses started to go  
And life became quite different  
And it was as tho' someone had planted seeds  
And people sprouted like common weeds  
And seemed unaware of accepted things  
And out of it grew an amusing thing  
Which I think is America having its fling  
And what I should like is to paint this thing.<sup>95</sup>

Stettheimer's use of growth metaphors to describe the ever expanding city as well as her desire to paint a modern New York coincides with O'Keeffe's desires. Chronicled in writing and executed in paint, both women sought to reproduce New York in a state of flux as new and massive architectural structures began to encompass the island of Manhattan.

Like O'Keeffe, Stettheimer took liberties with the urban landscape, creating a stylized version of lower Manhattan not topographically accurate. Lower Manhattan is in the background and takes up the space in the top half of the picture plane. The scale and perspective are distorted, directing the viewer's main focus to the Statue of Liberty, but she also leaves a central void between two destroyers in the central point of the canvas. The perspective also mimics the view of an arrival by boat to the city, paralleling Stettheimer's personal experience of returning to New York by water. Meshing old and new and moving buildings around to make the most appealing view, she takes the initiative to create her own city. In the lower left corner she has chosen to include historic townhouses to pay homage to the city's past. The Greek-revival style courthouse contains another common motif in Stettheimer's oeuvre: a statue of George

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<sup>95</sup> Bloemink, 73.

Washington.<sup>96</sup> At the lower left corner of the island, other historical attractions appear, including a statue of Christopher Columbus from Columbus Circle and Ulysses S. Grant's Tomb, even though the two structures are actually located miles away further uptown in Manhattan. The depicted architecture is surrounded by strolling individuals and vehicular traffic, connecting the scene to the present. Modern skyscrapers such as the Woolworth, Metropolitan Life, and the Bankers Trust Buildings are all featured, as well as a skyscraper under construction, highlighting the city's recent growth.<sup>97</sup> The artist depicts many forms of transportation, including multiple boats and bridges, such as the Staten Island Ferry and Brooklyn Bridge. Two large destroyers cut through the water, and a propellered biplane and dirigible soar in the left and right hand sky. A hot air balloon also floats peacefully above the city, practically tapping the highest point of the Woolworth Building.

With the color scheme, military references, and frame, the image appears overtly patriotic and theatrical. The painting contains a plethora of American flags flying from buildings and boats alike. The insertion of red, white, blue and gold buildings coupled with multiple uses of American symbols, such as Lady Liberty, eagles, and Presidential statues and memorials adds nationalistic flair. This patriotic color scheme is not limited to the painting, but extends to the mounting as well. The wooden frame is painted in a replica of a red, white, and blue tasseled cord, with a large gilded eagle perched atop. Similar yet less colorful ropes would have been found on the depicted battleship as well as the destroyers, hinting at a war-time, utilitarian function. The dramatic roping is also theatrical in nature, as it draws our eyes to the painting, much like a stage curtain pulled back to reveal the main event. The rope's dual role diminishes how the frame separates

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<sup>96</sup> Bloemick, *The Life and Art*, 53.

<sup>97</sup> Bloemick, "Visualizing Sight," 73.

what is pictured in the work of art from what lies outside of it. With references to the Navy as well as the theatre, the frame amplifies a sense of spectacle. The alteration of space, both in color and layout, further enhances the painting's pageantry and theatricality. Manhattan is altered and arranged for the viewer, the island rounded and polished. Stettheimer unabashedly puts a modern and victorious New York on display, as she was patriotic as well as personally invested in the war effort.

At the same time that Stettheimer repositions the city's topography, her painting celebrates a real historical event. The work commemorates President Woodrow Wilson's return from the Paris Peace Conference on July 8, 1919. Keeping the narrative factually accurate, Wilson is seen aboard the battleship *Washington*, escorted by other naval ships and a blimp.<sup>98</sup> The end of World War I called for celebration, and Stettheimer seemed happy to live in a country that embraced freedom and democracy. She acknowledges the origins of the United States without being overly didactic or preachy, painting a festive piece flavored by her campy sense of humor that nods to the country's past, present and future.

As Stettheimer embraced her new artistic style, her work attracted the eye of Alfred Stieglitz. Throughout the 1920s, he repeatedly invited her to show her paintings in his galleries, but she always refused.<sup>99</sup> Despite Stettheimer's resistance, both Stieglitz and O'Keeffe attended gatherings at the Stettheimer residence, and O'Keeffe befriended all of the sisters, especially Ettie. In 1927 and 1928, Florine Stettheimer and O'Keeffe began to correspond regularly in letters, and by 1928, Stettheimer painted a portrait of Stieglitz. O'Keeffe quickly found out about the painting, presumably through Marsden Hartley who had seen the final product at the Stettheimer's upstate summer residence,

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<sup>98</sup> Bloemink, "Imagine the Fun."

<sup>99</sup> Bloemink, "Visualizing Sight," 79.

and questioned Stettheimer about it in a letter.<sup>100</sup> During the 1920s, Stettheimer made many portraits, using as her subjects, female family members and male peers and contemporaries in the New York avant-garde art scene. The results are lighthearted, idealized, and embedded with multiple symbols referencing each sitter's individuality.

*Portrait of Alfred Stieglitz (fig. 15)* shows the sixty-four-year-old champion of modern American art looking much younger than his age, wrapped in his signature black cape. "303" and "The Room" written on the door sets the scene in his Intimate Gallery. Flanked on all sides by male artists he supported, he stands tall and proud, with one hand extended towards the viewer and the other grasping at the neckline of his suit, showing that Stettheimer was acutely aware of the patriarchal role Stieglitz played to the artists in his circle. Two male figures, represented just by their legs, enter from either side. From the right door enters Baron de Meyer, alluded to by his yellow glove and pointed toe. Charles Demuth, entering from the left, is recognizable by his cane, Diminutive versions of Arthur Dove and Henry McBride appear; the former sits on a chair in the background behind Demuth and the latter stands against the window, his arms folded stiffly. Other artists, including O'Keeffe, are not physically represented, but are instead present through their art. Cards baring names and symbols representing Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Paul Strand are magically propped up along the floor.<sup>101</sup>

In addition to the painting by O'Keeffe, Stettheimer implants other references to O'Keeffe. Her name is written backwards and vertically on the wall behind Stieglitz's left shoulder, using a variation of the vertical letter that Demuth employed in his poster portrait of O'Keeffe. A profile of her head is faintly sketched into the wall facing her

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<sup>100</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 162.

<sup>101</sup> Bloemink, 163.

name. Behind Stieglitz's right shoulder, Stettheimer draws our attention to the O'Keeffe painting within: it is of Lake George with a pop of pinkish-orange leaf. Stieglitz' family home was at Lake George, and he and O'Keeffe visited frequently. By depicting a place where Stieglitz and O'Keeffe spent time together, Stettheimer injects the domestic aspect of their relationship into the scene. Stieglitz and the painting by O'Keeffe are slightly off center, begging the question: Who or what is the true focus on this painting-- Stieglitz or his Circle? Finally, Bloemink points out that the swirl around Stieglitz's right hand is a shape borrowed from a 1915 O'Keeffe drawing, one of the first that drew Stieglitz to her work.<sup>102</sup> With multiple subtle references to O'Keeffe, Stettheimer cunningly suggests that perhaps because O'Keeffe is a woman, she is not awarded her rightful place within the circle. Additionally, the exclusion of a corporeal O'Keeffe could also reference the fact that Stieglitz had closer working relationships with other heterosexual male artists. O'Keeffe, soft spoken and non-confrontational, is easily unnoticed as a lightly sketched profile drawing on the wall. But her presence and impact were nonetheless felt, as her stock in the art world was continuing to rise. Stettheimer, acutely aware of the mutually beneficial relationship O'Keeffe and Stieglitz shared, wrote:

He photographs  
She is naked  
he proclaims  
She has no clothes  
other than his words.  
Goldenbrown and autumnred  
they drop fast  
and cyclone about her  
She turns them  
into painted air  
rainbowhued  
that whirls and swirls

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<sup>102</sup> Bloemink, 163.

and sucks him in.<sup>103</sup>

This poem perfectly supplements the painting. Stettheimer wrote this poem after seeing Stieglitz' exhibition of photographic "portraits" of a nude O'Keeffe.<sup>104</sup> Referring to the sexual rhetoric that Stieglitz places on O'Keeffe's work in the line "she turns them into painted air," Stettheimer observes that O'Keeffe feels through her work, and rather than confronting her husband publicly, she paints with a vengeance, working to prove herself worthy in a male dominated art world that has underestimated her. Stettheimer has painted O'Keeffe in this image as a symbolic cyclone in the painting next to Stieglitz's head as well as a swirl around his hand. She recognized that Stieglitz transformed O'Keeffe into a sensual possession in his own work; yet, Stettheimer believes that O'Keeffe's art was ultimately more powerful than Stieglitz's photographs and words.

Once Stieglitz and O'Keeffe learned about Stettheimer's portrait, O'Keeffe wrote her friend a letter of inquiry:

How pleased I am--the idea of seeing it is one of the very few things that gives me any feeling of pleasure when I think of returning to the city. I am very curious about it--He is so many contradictory things that I can't help wondering what you chose to put down--You undoubtedly don't see him as I do--no reason why you should. But I like it that you have painted him--no matter what you have painted--He has had a bad summer...but I don't know anything about ailing hearts--I only wish it had happened some other time of year as this is my best time for painting--but that is the way it goes...Again I must say I am most curious about Stieglitz' portrait.<sup>105</sup>

Stettheimer wrote back: "I don't think I have painted your special Stieglitz--I imagine I tried to do his special Stieglitz--but probably only achieved my special Stieglitz...Let's make a date for the unveiling."<sup>106</sup> Stettheimer has indeed painted the Stieglitz of her

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<sup>103</sup> Bloemink, 137.

<sup>104</sup> Bloemink, 136.

<sup>105</sup> Bloemink, 163.

<sup>106</sup> Bloemink, 163.

mind, an idealized creation of a powerful art world figure. Jonathan Weinberg writes that “the portrait is not a literal depiction but a composite of Stieglitz’s various aesthetic and promotional activities.”<sup>107</sup> Set in his gallery among the artists he represented, Stettheimer wryly indicates that he enjoys being the center of attention. Stettheimer has also limited her color palette, mimicking the use of monochromatic colors in Stieglitz’s own medium of photography, but reserves the pops of color for the marginalized figures within his circle, including O’Keeffe and the openly gay Demuth.

Stettheimer’s portrait painted Stieglitz and his circle with a degree of pomp and artifice. The image is lively with figures in motion and many artifacts of the American modern art scene. Space is compressed, and the only glimpse we have of the outside world is through a narrow window, which looks out on a strange scene, including a skyscraper, racetrack, and body of water. The race tracks, which could refer to the famous tracks in Lake George’s neighboring Saratoga Springs, are certainly not a mainstay in Manhattan, and Stettheimer’s carefully contrived view of the outdoors seems as artificial as indoors. Stettheimer takes individuals who exist in the New York art realm, creating her own distinct scene. By producing a portrait, that has a rejuvenated likeness with extended symbolic content, she was actively participating in a mode of portraiture favored by the Stieglitz circle artists, even though she chose not to involve herself directly with this group, continually refusing Stieglitz’s attempts to exhibit her work in his gallery space. In this painting and in her life, she put herself in a role where she controlled the space and people around her.

Stettheimer’s odd manipulation of space continues as she progresses in her artistic abilities. *Christmas* (**fig. 16**) from 1930-40 is a fascinating work that has not

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<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Weinberg, “The Hands of the Artist: Alfred Stieglitz’s Photographs of Georgia O’Keeffe,” In *Ambition and Love in Modern American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001): 77.

previously been discussed by scholars. A yellow and red bedecked Christmas tree is central, surrounded by a skating rink used by an array of gay figures, including elves, fairies, and bears. In the left foreground, a youthful Ettie Stettheimer, wrapped in an elegant red coat, gazes at the viewer, placing a single red rose at the base of a statue of German scientist Alexander von Humboldt. A statue of William Shakespeare flanks the tree on the right, with a relaxed policeman and his horse guarding the entire scene. Many of the items in the foreground are found in Central Park, including the two statues, green park benches and a wrought iron covered pavilion. Perhaps the most peculiar addition to the scene is a headdressed Native American man kneeling in the central foreground holding the foot of a sophisticated woman wearing ice skates. His uncompromising gaze unsettles the viewer. The scene is a winter wonderland, and all surfaces are covered in a blue-tinted snow.

The space in the background is filled with architecture and advertisements. The city, spread in a semicircle around the Christmas tree, is cheery and bright. The buildings are carefully spaced and grouped, leaving room for grand avenues to flow between. Stettheimer's strange representation of space in the background of her scenes may well relate to the distance she held herself from the mainstream world. Stettheimer, her sisters, and mother lived a privileged matrilineal life, which set them apart from most of the world that she observed and encountered. Therefore the buildings may be symbolic of the remote relationship the Stettheimers have with the city, as their wealth afforded them the opportunity to choose and carefully curate the spaces they inhabit. Towering skyscrapers stand next to smaller structures, and billboards as large as many of the buildings intermingle with the architecture. Advertisements for Horton's ice cream and Camel cigarettes are situated next to bank buildings and car dealerships, begging the question: has the religious holiday turned into a capitalistic

celebration? Stettheimer chose a vivid color palette of pinks, yellows and blues for the scene. This chromatic mixture does not connect to traditional Christmas colors, such as red and green. The tree is traditional, but the modern glowing advertisements steal attention from it.

A bright orange and pink sun radiates its light over the scene. The warm, pink glow it leaves shares connections with the following poem by Stettheimer:

Occasionally  
A human being  
Saw my light  
Rushed in  
Got singed  
Got scared  
Rushed out  
Called fire  
Or it happened  
That he tried  
To subdue it  
Or it happened  
He tried to extinguish it  
Never did a friend  
Enjoy it  
The way it was  
So I learned to  
Turn it low  
Turn it out  
When I meet a stranger--  
Out of courtesy  
I turn on a soft  
Pink light  
Which is found modest  
Even charming  
It is a protection  
Against wear  
And tears  
And when  
I am rid of  
The Always-to-be-Stranger  
I turn on my light  
And become myself<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, XIII.

Stettheimer describes the mask she puts on to protect herself around strangers through the metaphor of a gauzy pink light. Pink acts as a sanctuary, shielding her from criticism and the outside world. Washing the Christmas scene in a pink light highlights its artifice, indicating that the painting does not capture the true spirit of Christmas, but rather its adopted market driven reality. In a modern capitalistic society, she humorously depicts the accumulation of things subverting the importance of the Christian religion, highlighting the incongruities between the Christian religion and its holidays. Since she was Jewish, Stettheimer would not have had the same connection to the Christian holiday as most New Yorkers; yet, she seems to suggest that Christianity is being imposed in America.

Stettheimer's self-proclaimed masterpiece *Family Portrait II* (**fig. 17**) serves as the apotheosis of her career--a work rich in empirical symbol and style.<sup>109</sup> The four Stettheimer women are systematically dispersed on a large outdoor terrace attached to their home on 182 West 58th Street at Alwyn Court, as indicated on the elegant baldaquin found in the upper right corner. Stettheimer also announces that we are gazing at her familial vision by writing "4 ST.s seen by Florine" on a serpentine banner located in the upper left corner. An ornate and colorful carpet with a red semicircle on the floor names each female for the viewer. On the left, a young Florine in profile holds her artist's palette. Dressed in high heels and a chic, modern pantsuit, she exudes the "New Woman" sensibility, wearing elegant but practical garb for an artist. Next to Florine sits her sister, Ettie, in a sophisticated lace dress with a book splayed on her lap, alluding to her writing career. On the right side of the canvas, Carrie is also clad gracefully in a full-length white dress with black lace detailing, daintily holding a

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<sup>109</sup> Georgiana Uhlyarik, "4 ST.S Seen by Florine," In *Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017): 47.

cigarette. Their mother, Rosetta, seated in a mandorla-like chair, occupies herself with a solitary game of cards, her billowing ball gown spreading, giving her a weighty and matronly presence amongst her daughters. Three large flowers intrude on the space, their wispy vines stroking the air.

Once again, Stettheimer carefully constructs the architectural background of her painting, arranging buildings to fit her aesthetic vision. The family is high above the city, removed from the life on the streets, a position afforded to them by their wealth. A blue background with a horizon line merges water and sky. The architecture is almost exclusively white, airy and ethereal in nature. The newly constructed art-deco Chrysler Building, RCA Building at Rockefeller Center, and Radio City Music Hall can all be seen in the left corner of the painting.<sup>110</sup> The Statue of Liberty again makes an appearance in her work, marking that her return to New York has made this scene a reality. A single crystal chandelier, in line with the architecture, echoes the shapes made by the neighboring Chrysler Building. It suspends over the scene with the figurative weight of a skyscraper, but it dually has a light quality, as the viewer can imagine the delicate crystals waving in a breeze. Curtains suspended above the picture plane frame the scene on either side, adding her signature layer of theatricality. Unlike her tight and enclosed portrait of Stieglitz, the space that she creates for her sisters, mother, and herself to inhabit is open and exposed to the elements. Their residence high above the city also offers an ethereal atmosphere, recalling O’Keeffe’s love of living above the city in the Shelton Hotel.

Flowers make frequent appearances in her oeuvre, and Stettheimer gave her flowers to a more commanding role in her mature work. In *Family Portrait II*, a red poppy, white lily, and pink rose take center stage, jutting into the foreground and drawing

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<sup>110</sup> Uhlyarik, “4 ST.S Seen by Florine,” 52.

attention away from the figures. The flowers also partially obstruct our view of Ettie and Rosetta. Nochlin argues that each flower is symbolic of a sister, and the vines binding the three represent her mother, while the bouquet as a whole “dwarfs and overpowers the human life in the painting,” acting as “a kind of testimonial offered by the artist to her family, her city, and to the very world of vivid artifice she created with them.”<sup>111</sup> The flowers are large, formidable and serve the purpose of further enlivening the scene with an appreciation of modern life. These three flowers are not wilting; rather, they are dynamic and at the peak of their beauty. While flowers are traditionally charged with feminine notions, her flowers subvert conventional readings of florals as inherently feminine. The flowers are lively and joyful, just like Stettheimer.

The floral motif surfaces often in Stettheimer’s body of work. Like *Family Portrait II*, her floral arrangements are colorful and celebratory, sitting atop a surface and placed in a vase, asserting their space. The still lives are not meant to serve as symbols, but rather are painted because they are beautiful and cheerful. She called her paintings of flowers “eyegays” to stress that they are meant to be viewed and not smelled.<sup>112</sup> In the poem “Revolt of the Violet,” Stettheimer amusingly describes her relationship with flowers:

This is a vulgar age  
Sighed the violet  
Why must humans drag us  
Into their silly lives  
They treat us  
As attributes  
As symbols  
And make us  
Fade--

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<sup>111</sup> Nochlin, “Rococo Subversive,” 134.

<sup>112</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 58.

Stink.<sup>113</sup>

Stettheimer's desires flowers at their peak, but recognizes that their life cycle will not allow them to stay beautiful for long. Nochlin asserts that her flowers are symbolic of love and function "as a kind of testimonial offered by the artist to her family, her city, and to the very world of vivid artifice she created with them."<sup>114</sup> Stettheimer created these ideal bouquets herself. Every morning she meticulously arranged flowers for display in her house, and when the women began spending summers at an estate outside of the city, Stettheimer arose every morning to tend to flowers she planted herself:

All morning  
For hours  
I have been putting flowers  
Together  
In vases  
I strip them of their green  
They look more brilliant  
Become more effective  
More "garish" our former timid interior  
decorator Mr. B would have said.  
The bouquet I like best  
I put on the dining room table  
On the filet lace round  
On the light gray painted boards  
It helps--it satisfies  
But tomorrow  
my flowers  
will show the ravages of time  
They will wither  
They will smell  
I will have a disgust for them  
I shall dislike changing the water  
And I shall feel sympathy  
with Marcel  
for preferring  
imitation flowers.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Bloemink, 59.

<sup>114</sup> Nochlin, "Rococo Subversive," 134.

<sup>115</sup> Bloemink, 61.

Stettheimer was dedicated to caring for live flowers and curating them into lovely presentations, but the work was tiring and the beauty of the flowers fleeting. Like O’Keeffe’s fabric flowers in *Manhattan*, Stettheimer’s flowers in *Family Portrait II* are idealized yet tangible. The flowers in *Manhattan* are suspended in air, dancing among the sharp and structured buildings that make up O’Keeffe’s cityscape. Stettheimer’s flowers are also suspended in midair, but are lively and animated, as if the green tendrils could reach out of the picture plane, grasping at any unsuspecting viewers. Henry McBride even described Stettheimer’s flowers as “sufficiently botanical, but they are also unearthly” because she “imbued them with the occult, something reaching out of this world to that other.”<sup>116</sup> Both women artists, O’Keeffe and Stettheimer, work to remove conventional feminine readings from florals by altering the space around the flowers and embedding the florals in a modern urban cityscape. The flowers, removed from a traditional still life setting, become ebullient, acting as a celebration of life in the modern era. At the same time, Stettheimer uses flowers as accents in a female-dominated space, while O’Keeffe uses them as an expression of her intervention into the male art world and of nature into culture. Both women utilize floral motifs to inject the symbols with new meanings that challenge historical feminine narratives.

*Family Portrait II* represents the climax of Stettheimer’s idiosyncratic style as well as a summation of her artistic concerns. And in true Stettheimer fashion, she found words to complement her work:

My attitude is one of love  
is all adoration  
for all the fringes  
all the color  
all tinsel creation  
I like slippers gold  
I like oysters cold  
and my garden with mixed flowers

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<sup>116</sup> Gammel and Zelazo, “Wrapped in Cellophane,” 17.

and the sky full of towers  
and traffic in the streets  
and Maillard's sweets  
and Bendel's clothes  
and Nat Lewis hose  
and Tappes window arrays  
and crystal fixtures  
and my pictures  
and Walt Disney cartoons  
and colored balloons.<sup>117</sup>

From imposing skyscrapers to cheerful flowers, many of her favorite things listed in this poem are on display in work she made while living in New York City. She does not shy away from creating her perfect idealized city, a result of her wealth and complete control over her artistic career. Indeed, she is a writer and a painter, but also a humorist, slyly poking fun at some of the deficiencies and foibles of the modern age. Whether confronting capitalism, imperialism or the hypocrisies of the art world, she always does so with a layer of carefree campiness. Her jokes, masked in vibrant color, lively figures and lightweight structures, are for insiders clever enough to decipher them.

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<sup>117</sup> Bloemink, *The Art and Life*, 181-2.

## CHAPTER 4

### BERENICE ABBOTT: PHOTOGRAPHING THE FLEETING CITY

For her first one-woman photographic exhibition in Paris in 1926, twenty-eight-year old Bernice Abbott changed her name to Berenice, a nod to a French virgin unwilling to marry a king, indicating that she was free of patriarchal constraints and had no reliance on men.<sup>118</sup> Abbott enjoyed the sound of the additional letter so much that the new name stuck, and her life's trajectory rose to meet its meaning. Epitomizing the New Woman, Berenice had a fierce independent streak. In 1929, she left a lucrative career as a portrait photographer in Paris to pursue a timely archival project of capturing the rapidly modernizing New York City before the new urban landscape entirely enveloped the old. Her characteristic style of documentary photography with its spare and unsentimental documentation of largely vacant streets has conventionally led scholars to situate her work within the trajectory of Depression-era WPA photojournalists. Yet she takes a different, and this chapter argues, a more distinctly modern approach to expressing her relationship to the material world than the widely-recognized Farm Security Administration artists who photographed Dust Bowl migrants in rural America. Rather than photographing human subjects to capture the reality of contemporary lived experience, she instead found inspiration in the morphing topography of dynamic, modernizing New York. Like O'Keeffe and Stettheimer, Abbott saw the city as a living organism with a constantly changing life of its own and for this reason, her work suggests a sense of urgency to chronicle the city in its current state. Also, she was interested in creating precisely framed photographs that represented New York in a

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<sup>118</sup> Melissa McEuen, "Modernism Ascendant: Berenice Abbott's Perception of the Evolving Cityscape" in *Seeing America: Women Photographers Between the Wars*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000)," 257.

realistic, yet aesthetically pleasing way, and achieves this aim through dedication to composition and line similar to O’Keeffe. Abbott once said:

Cities have a personality. Not the people in them, but the buildings, the little odd corners...And New York, especially. It’s so changing. It’s in the making. We’re making it. There’s so much movement. It gets into your blood. You feel what the past left to you and you see what you are going to leave to the future.<sup>119</sup>

She was fascinated with the city and dedicated to preserving it through art for future generations. Abbott’s point of view stemmed from her unique understanding of the dichotomy imposed by rapid modernization, and she seized on the timely opportunity of photographing burgeoning New York by carefully framing scenes that aesthetically encapsulate change.

As a “straight” documentary style photographer, Abbott’s medium differs from O’Keeffe and Stettheimer in many ways. Abbott despised pictorialism and other photographic movements that aimed to make photographs look like paintings through soft and hazy camera effects, describing such work as “pleasant, pretty, artificial pictures in the superficial spirit of certain minor painters.”<sup>120</sup> Instead, she desired to create photography that was straight and objective. While it is widely believed that art can never be truly “objective,” Abbott nonetheless made it her mission to create work that “seeks to reach the roots, to get under the skin of reality.”<sup>121</sup> Moreover, she thought it possible to create images rooted in realism while also remaining dedicated to the highest aesthetic ideals of composition, including line, shape, form, light, and shade:

[My] photographs are to be documentary, as well as artistic, the original plan. This means that they will have elements of formal organization and style; they will use the devices of abstract art if these devices fit the given subject; they will aim at realism, but not at the cost of sacrificing all esthetic factors. They will tell

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<sup>119</sup> McEuen, “Modernism Ascendant,” 269.

<sup>120</sup> McEuen, 252.

<sup>121</sup> Terri Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 19.

facts...[b]ut these facts will be set forth as organic parts of the whole picture, as living and functioning details of the entire complex social scene.<sup>122</sup>

With these ambitions in mind, she set her intentions to document the city in a realistic way, without subscribing so completely to realism that aesthetic qualities are compromised. Abbott's goal as a photographer was to achieve a realism unattained with a brush. In this regard, her artistic aims differ from O'Keeffe and Stettheimer, who were not attempting to record an objective reality of the city, but rather to record their own individual reactions and experiences against its backdrop. All three women were struck by the city's liveliness, energy, and potential for growth. Sparked by the modern lines and movement created in the modern landscape, they created work that challenged the notion space and who can claim it. In an urban space normally relegated to men, these three artists declared the city as their own and made it their muse.

Surprisingly, there is little discussion of the New Woman movement in existing literature on Abbott, even though she is a quintessential example of this burgeoning modern gender type: career oriented and unattached to men or children. Unlike O'Keeffe, she had no husband in which to rely, and no family wealth to depend on like Stettheimer. Instead, she focused all her energy on building an artistic career, providing for herself financially most of her life. Her most significant relationship was with critic Elizabeth McCausland, which lasted the duration of McCausland's life. Abbott was stubbornly independent, and often declined invitations to collaborate or mingle with other artists. On principle, she refused to be associated with any artistic groups or movements popular in New York City during the 1930s, and avoided Stieglitz and his followers, calling him a man of "stupendous ego" and his protégés members of a "powerful cult."<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 25.

<sup>123</sup> McEuen, "Modernism Ascendent," 252.

She was forcefully persuasive, and got what she wanted out of meetings with important art world figures, including curators, directors, and patrons.

Born in Springfield, Ohio in 1899, Abbott had a lonely and unhappy childhood. Her father abandoned her mother when Berenice was young, taking her five older siblings with him. Abbott left home as soon as she was able at the age of eighteen. She studied journalism at Ohio State University for a year, but quickly escaped the Midwest after visiting New York City for the first time. In 1918, again attempting journalistic studies at Columbia University, she dropped out and worked odd jobs before deciding to become an artist. In 1921, she moved to Paris to study sculpture, spending three years struggling to develop her craft. Ultimately, Abbott ended her sculpting career in order to search for a new and organic artistic education on the Parisian streets.<sup>124</sup> Her search for inspiration led her to two artists that would greatly influence her career: the experimental surrealist Man Ray and the eccentric documenter of Parisian streets Eugene Atget.

In 1923, Abbott accepted an offer of employment by Man Ray to be his darkroom assistant. Seeking an apprentice “who knew nothing of photography,” he hired Abbott and taught her basic darkroom techniques.<sup>125</sup> Although she did not directly adopt the surrealist style that Man Ray championed, working with him opened the door for further discovery in the field of photography. While under his employ, Abbott fell in love with the experimental and creative potential of photography, and began taking portraits of the many engaging personalities she encountered within Parisian artistic circles, including James Joyce, Jean Cocteau, and eventually, Eugène Atget. Man Ray first introduced Abbott to Atget’s haunting photographs of old Paris, and she was so intrigued by his work that she set out to meet and photograph him. In 1927, he sat for a portrait with

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<sup>124</sup> McEuen, 253-255.

<sup>125</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 10.

Abbott (**fig. 18**), and after developing the photographs and bringing them to Atget's apartment to show him the final product, Abbott learned that Atget had suddenly died. Realizing the immediate disarray of his work and the importance of carrying on his legacy and preserving it for future generations, Abbott purchased as much of his archives as she could, including fifteen hundred glass plates and thousands of prints.<sup>126</sup> Abbott valued his honest work, which she termed "realism unadorned."<sup>127</sup> She committed to promoting his work while also finding her own voice within the realist and straight photography mode that so captivated her.

Although Abbott was intrigued by the style of Atget, it would be incorrect to label her as a mere follower. Atget did not consider himself an artist in the same way as Abbott. His purpose was to document the old and sell his photographs to state museums, and his isolated images of Parisian streets and storefronts seem to honor the past and dwell on what society left behind. He has a clear obsession with old Paris and does not welcome change, as seen in his 1898 photograph, *Door, Hôtel de Cluny* (**fig. 19**). He photographs an ornate hotel doorway that serves as a relic of the past, free of contemporary influences. Abbott, on the other hand, champions progress and visualizes the interaction between past and present as ultimately a benefit to society. Abbott once stated:

If the photographer is not trained in history and architecture, he should at least have the intuition of the past, present, and future. His eyes should be antennae for the significant forms of life about him. He should have, too, an understanding of the interplay of forces in the world today, how history affects his daily life and how it alters the fact of his city.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> McEuen, "Modernism Ascendent," 259.

<sup>127</sup> McEuen, 261.

<sup>128</sup> Berenice Abbott, *Berenice Abbott Photographer: A Modern Vision* (New York: New York Public Library, 1989), 26.

While she valued Atget's methods and discerning eye, his interests lay in preserving the past. Abbott utilized his visual language and style but inserted her own philosophies and unique vision of the true purpose of modern documentary photography: to capture rapid urbanization and recognize the chaotic beauty inherent in the modern cityscape. *South and DePeyster Streets* (**fig. 20**) clearly showcases her preferred style of contrasting old and new. In the foreground are old buildings along the East River piers, while newly constructed towers on Wall Street loom in the background. Abbott contrasts through heightened differences in tone-- the lighter elongated skyscrapers reach towards the sky and out of the frame, while the darker old structures bear the weight of time. She cleverly framed the photograph so the skyscraper's line continues where the old brick structured roof ends. In the central foreground, we also see an old streetlamp of the kind that O'Keeffe was fond of painting in works such as *New York Street with Moon* (**fig. 2**). Abbott borrowed many formal lessons from Atget, such as the importance of tonal contrast as well as his interest in photographing doorways, wispy trees, and statues, but her photographic work refocused the subject matter towards progress rather than preservation.

Coming back to New York to immortalize Atget's archives, Abbott rediscovered her own country and stumbled upon a subject matter worthy of her artistic attention. She recalled that shortly after her return in 1929, she immediately "knew it was my country, something I had to set down in photographs."<sup>129</sup> She set for herself an ambitious task: to capture a fleeting landscape during the height of a devastating economic depression. This task was made more difficult by her position as a female operating in a male dominated art scene, and working within a medium that still struggled to garner respect

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<sup>129</sup> John Raeburn, "Culture Morphology in Berenice Abbott's New York," in *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 116.

as a form of “high art.” Nonetheless, she was committed to the seemingly impossible charge of recording modern life through architectural scenes rather than portraiture. Her photography challenged the viewer to decipher meaning and unpack complex layers of metaphorical visual displays. She said of the city:

I may feel that the skyscrapers are beautiful and majestic. Or I may feel that they are ugly, inhuman, illogical, ridiculous, pathological growths which have no place in a planned city. Whatever I think and feel about the skyscrapers, I say through understanding of and application of composition. Vertical lines may seem to topple toward each other, or fall apart, ready to collapse; they do not create a balanced whole. On the other hand, the photograph may present the skyscrapers in such a manner that verticals sway in a majestic and graceful rhythm expressing unity and order. Even more complex is the problem if the photographer sees the skyscrapers as both beautiful and ugly and seeks to create a duality in the photograph by posing opposite tendencies against each other in dynamic composition.<sup>130</sup>

The tension she felt when describing New York City is evident. Her discussion of growth, composition, and line mirrored the thoughts of O’Keeffe and Stettheimer. Recognizing the dualities present in her earnest project, she deemed herself worthy of unpacking the complexities present in the shifting architectural framework of New York City as an important international symbol of modernity. New York had radically transformed since she had first visited as a teenager in 1917. The city added over a million new residents, construction of major bridges, roads and subways made the city more accessible for many and allowed for citizens to travel further from their homes, and rapid construction of skyscrapers altered the skyline from year to year. Modern amenities allowed New Yorkers to live a more fast-paced life. By the time Abbott returned to New York, skyscrapers dominated the architectural landscape in a “scramble for the sky.”<sup>131</sup> Having witnessed the immensity of the city’s evolution, and seeing it was only accelerating,

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<sup>130</sup> Raeburn, “Culture Morphology,” 127.

<sup>131</sup> Christoph Lindner, *Imagining New York: Literature, Urbanism, and the Visual Arts, 1890-1940* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28.

Abbott's intense desire to place her unique mark on this fleeting moment in time became even more undeniable.

*Changing New York* was her idea for a project to construct an archive of images that represented her vision of the morphing city. The final product, a book published in 1939, contained ninety-seven photographs chosen from over three hundred she took between 1935 and 1938. Most images were accompanied by text written by the critic Elizabeth McCausland that was brief, historical, and didactic in nature. Abbott photographed all of New York City, from the giant skyscrapers of Wall Street to the underdeveloped spaces of Washington Heights, and even ventured to various Boroughs. She explored high and low vantage points of intriguing pieces of architecture, close shots of small business enterprises, and large scenes that encompass many eras of New York's structural and architectural framework. The text is succinct and meant to complement the photographs, so the true emphasis is placed on Abbott's extraordinary images. They are arranged chronologically from south to north, and shot on an 8x10 Universal camera that allowed for bold tonalities, an incredible sense of depth, and sharp details when recording architecture. However, the large format camera required long exposures, and even though documenting human figures was not a central pillar of her vision, the exposure period made it difficult to shoot human subjects with crisp precision.<sup>132</sup> She envisioned a comprehensive book that did not favor the iconic over the ordinary, but instead delivered a realist's view of the city.

Whether using high vantage points to make things appear small and insignificant or allowing low vantage points to monumentalize structures, Abbott clearly saw the collective presentation of an archive as a powerful tool to showcase photography. Individual images of New York could not tell the whole story, but a large collection of

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<sup>132</sup> Raeburn, "Culture Morphology," 116.

diverse images grouped together, could. In 1940, when asked to pick her favorite photograph from her New York archive, she said:

Suppose we took a thousand negatives and made a gigantic montage; a myriad-faceted picture combining the elegances, the squalor, the curiosities, the monuments, the sad faces, the triumphant faces, the power, the irony, the strength, the decay, the past, the present, the future of the city--that would be my favorite picture.<sup>133</sup>

She elaborated on the importance of grouping images into a collective body by stating that there is importance in the ability “to see a rapid succession of pictures, to fuse them in mind and memory, to reinforce each separate image with the strength and meaning of all the others.”<sup>134</sup> By wedding her unique formal perspective with individuality and creating something distinctly modern, her personal perspective also shines through in her work.

Abbott, an independent artist dedicated to her craft and discovering her voice, routinely refused to compromise on her vision, which in the end made her work all the more autonomous. From the beginning, she wanted to work alone, and even as she was struggling to make money after moving back to New York City in 1929, she spent every Wednesday exploring the city with her camera, searching for new and inspiring places to photograph.<sup>135</sup> After almost six years of working odd jobs and searching for funding, she continued this routine and still pursued her goals even as she faced her own poverty. In 1935, she obtained funding for her project through the Federal Art Project (FAP), a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) founded in 1935 as part of the New Deal to get Americans back to work after the Great Depression. The FAP supported

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<sup>133</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 9.

<sup>134</sup> Raeburn, “Culture Morphology,” 118.

<sup>135</sup> McEuen, “Modernism Ascendent,” 264.

artistic projects while highlighting their value to the nation.<sup>136</sup> She advertised herself as an outsider who grew up in the Midwest and was trained as an artist in Paris. In her application essay, she sought to persuade the FAP to fund her work by stressing the importance and sense of immediacy she saw in her task:

“It is important that they should be photographed today, not tomorrow; for tomorrow may see many of these exciting and important mementos of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New York swept away to make room for new colossi...The tempo of the metropolis is not of eternity, or even time, but of a vanishing instant.”<sup>137</sup>

Her urgency about capturing New York in its unique state of flux provided a high degree of autonomy not given to others that worked within Depression era, government funded art projects.

*Changing New York* was her idea for a project to construct an archive of images that represented her vision of the morphing city. Classified an FAP Photography Division “Creative Project” allowed for an amount of immunity unseen in many federally run art projects. Abbott conducted her project with little governmental interference: she operated as not only the photographer, but also as the director, consultant and printer. The FAP supplied her with money for a support team, including a driver, two technical assistants, and two researchers but she took it upon herself to complete most of these jobs independently.<sup>138</sup> From the very beginning of her negotiations with the FAP, Abbott demanded autonomy and received it. Other photographers struggled to maintain the same independence that Abbott gained. While the rare artist such as Walker Evans walked away from a government-funded grant, many artists trudged on despite roadblocks. Dorothea Lange, the FSA photographer responsible for the era’s most iconic

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<sup>136</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 20.

<sup>137</sup> McEuen, “Modernism Ascendent,” 273.

<sup>138</sup> McEuen, 279.

image, “Migrant Mother,” consistently had to fight with the FSA. She was forced to send all negatives to Washington, while Abbott developed her own negatives and controlled selection of all images.<sup>139</sup>

As she wandered the streets of New York in search of inspiration for her project, she seems to have both baffled and intimidated the men she encountered. Not only was she working alone and traveling through some of the most dangerous parts of the city, she also was working in the field still heavily dominated by men. Recalling an instance of men trying to play a practical joke on her, she remarked:

Men used to make fun of me all the time. They couldn’t understand what I was doing. The worst time I ever had was when I wanted to photograph the George Washington Bridge, which was just going up. I wanted to shoot it from up in the crane. The construction workers put me in the pan and, once I was high in the air, they swung the crane back and forth so I couldn’t take any pictures. I was terrified.<sup>140</sup>

This was a common barrier working in a male dominated world, especially as a female during the depression. As a self-sufficient woman, she was also intimidating to men because she was employed at a time when so many men were out of work. One can assume that when male photographers such as Lewis Hine took shots like *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper* from 1932 (**fig. 21**), dependent on the cooperation of male construction worker-types, they did not face skeptical or hostile treatment.

Abbott’s formal perspective in *Changing New York* is innovative and unique; in fact, she termed her thematic approach “culture morphology,” which explores “how structural form embedded the city’s history.”<sup>141</sup> This approach meant giving attention to both the old and new architecture, the ordinary as well as the iconic. In the book, there

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<sup>139</sup> McEuen, 287.

<sup>140</sup> McEuen, “Modernism Ascendent,” 264.

<sup>141</sup> Raeburn, 121.

are very few landmark buildings or tourist attractions, as Abbott tended to photograph unusual architectural subjects that represented her “real” New York. Times Square, the Chrysler Building, and Central Park are missing, and while the Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty are present, they appear only as easily overlooked background details that express depth and contrast within larger compositions. In *Broadway to the Battery* (**fig. 22**), Abbott captures the scene from a high vantage point of the roof of a fifty-five-story building with a view of the financial district and the New York harbor.<sup>142</sup> The Statue of Liberty can be seen as a speck in the background. Unlike Stettheimer’s *New York/Liberty* (**fig. 14**), which is painted from a perspective aboard a boat in the harbor that gave prominence to Lady Liberty, Abbott commandingly dwarfs this iconic landmark. Skyscrapers made the bird’s eye view more easily attainable. This viewpoint is not intended to romanticize the city, though this attempt at impartial document of 1930s architectural New York has drama that showcases “the skyscraper in relation to the less colossal edifices which preceded it” and captures “the spirit of the metropolis...its hurrying tempo, its congested streets, the past jostling the present.”<sup>143</sup>

Abbott visually displays her mission by using an obscure site for her first photograph in the book, *DePeyster Statue, Bowling Green* (**fig. 23**). The photograph features an off-center statue set before a background of Wall Street skyscrapers. The street level is out of the frame, and there are no living humans present, only a representation of one, leaving the viewer with the eerie feeling produced by things made by man: colossal buildings and a “life-like” statue. A few blurred bushes and trees also hint at natural life. The statue features Colonel Abraham de Peyster, a man who would

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<sup>142</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 344.

<sup>143</sup> Terri Weissman, “Berenice Abbott, Elizabeth McCausland, and the “Great Democratic Book,”” in *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 23.

not be immediately recognizable to most viewers and was a leading seventeenth-century Dutch colonial figure, serving as mayor, chief justice and president.<sup>144</sup> Abbott shoots from a low vantage point, giving the statue a more commanding presence in the frame, while also juxtaposing the Colonel against a backdrop of massive, newly constructed Wall Street buildings. Abbott seems to share with Stettheimer a similar fascination in neo-classical public statues, but unlike Stettheimer, Abbott's statues stand in isolation and command more space. In contrast, as seen in *Christmas* (**fig. 16**), Stettheimer animates these monuments by showing human figures playfully interacting with the static figures. Humans dance around the statues and offer sentimental gifts in memory of the immortalized individual. Abbott does not fix DePeyster within a jolly narrative, but instead marks him a somber presence.

The towering financial buildings may symbolize the corporatization and greed that has contributed to the devastating Great Depression, adding another layer of complexity to the image. Abbott employs dualities of tone as well as subject matter; for example, sunlight highlights the statue and creates bold tonalities in the background buildings. With this strong photograph, Abbott makes clear her archival intentions: to showcase images that confront New York's complicated past while also presenting a realistic picture of the city as contemporary. Many of Abbott's images work in this manner and metaphorically act as an iceberg--there is more than meets the eye upon first glance.

Like Stettheimer, Abbott was fascinated by movement and modes of modern transportation throughout the city. The photograph *Downtown Skyport, Foot of Wall Street* (**fig. 24**), displays one such new preoccupation -- the skyport. Seaplanes were a new invention, and executives from all over the east coast were flown to Wall Street for

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<sup>144</sup> Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland, *Changing New York* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1939), ii.

their daily work.<sup>145</sup> Stettheimer's *New York/Liberty* does not feature seaplanes, but she does paint many other types of modern transportation in her own work. Sharing an interest in the theme of modern motion, both women seem to comment on modern society's increasing dependence on technology in their daily lives. In the background, mountainous twentieth-century buildings encroach on smaller nineteenth-century ones. Despite its size, the modern white skyscraper on the right appears unthreatening due to Abbott's use of light tonality. Additionally, the Cities Services Building on the left in "diffused focus" appears ethereal and elegant.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, both skyscrapers reach beyond the frame, as if these new architectural marvels (and even Abbott's photography) are testing the limits of gravity.

The tonal composition becomes ironic when considering the human subjects. Seated in the left foreground are two young boys with shoeshine kits, waiting on potential customers among the executives coming in and out of the skyport. In typical fashion, Abbott has added human figures not as the focus of a composition, but to serve her larger narrative about the complexities of the modern city. Their angelic youth may prompt viewers to imagine a potential rags and riches tale, but their situation is likely more dire, as they rely on the patronage of the powerful Wall Street tycoons who helped to bring about the Great Depression.<sup>147</sup> Their off-center positioning and slightly blurred figures further point to their marginal status as child workers, a far cry from Stettheimer's elegant figures exuding wealth, privilege, and intelligence.

Another image that appears to encapsulate most of New York's history is *Washington Square, Looking North* (**fig. 25**). As the viewer moves into space, different

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<sup>145</sup> Abbott and McCausland, *Changing New York*, 16.

<sup>146</sup> Raeburn, "Culture Morphology," 135.

<sup>147</sup> Raeburn, 135.

eras of New York's history are represented: the open park delineates pre-colonial space; the 1830s Greek revival housing; the 1889 Roman arch; the towering 1927 apartment building; and finally the modern Empire State building. The image is ripe for a reading of what Abbott calls "anarchistic unplanning."<sup>148</sup> The different architectural types coupled with the green space and trees in the foreground shows the organic disarray resulting over the years of construction. Like Stettheimer's flowers and O'Keeffe's celestial orbs and strands of smoke, Abbott's wispy trees imbue the scene with natural elements. Naked trees are a common motif in many of Abbott's urban scenes. She preferred to photograph in early spring and late fall when the trees were bare.<sup>149</sup> The trees function as a powerful linear element, and with a statuesque presence, they seem to guard the square. Through framing, the imposing tree in the left foreground even stands taller than the recently constructed apartment building, implying that it may be the oldest structure in the park. But the question remains: will the tree last, or will it meet its demise to make room for more modern structures? In photographs such as *Washington Square, Looking North*, Abbott shows the collective natural and urban history of a single important Manhattan location.

*Fortieth Street Between Sixth and Seventh Avenues (fig. 26)* demonstrates Abbott's mastery of expressing the organic spirit of New York's city planning that links the past to the present. The older buildings in the left foreground are shrouded in shadow, suggesting perhaps that they are past their prime. According to McCausland's text, the 1901 Bryant Park Studio Building on the left and the 1913 World Tower Building on the right frame the newly constructed Bricken Casino and 1400 Broadway buildings in

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<sup>148</sup> Raeburn, 122.

<sup>149</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 22.

the center of the frame.<sup>150</sup> Three eras of New York architecture are juxtaposed, but the real star of the set is the modern, angular, stepped-back structures in the middle. Abbott is again using light to her advantage as she magnifies the terracing that appear like step ladders leading to the building's apex.<sup>151</sup> Might these metaphorical steps indicate the climb one must make in order to be successful in an increasingly capitalistic society?

This photograph also has similarities to O'Keeffe's *Manhattan* (**fig. 10**). In both pieces, midtown Manhattan's buildings are on display, and ziggurat steps add dynamism to the overall scene. They both showcase the energetic forms of modern architecture. Abbott uses tone to the same effect as O'Keeffe uses color: to emphasize contrast and imbue the buildings with a sense of liveliness. The two also contrast the old and the new. Abbott shrouds the nineteenth-century buildings in shadow and dark tones, while the light strikes on the twentieth-century structures. O'Keeffe's scene is almost entirely made up with modern buildings with the exception of a few small leaning brownstones. The two pieces share a spirit of dynamism and energy that was palpable in modern New York due in part to the new skyscrapers.

Abbott photographed two edifices that held personal significance to O'Keeffe and Stettheimer: the Radiator Building and Alwyn Court. In *Fortieth Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues* (**fig. 27**), Abbott placed the Radiator Building off center. Unlike those in O'Keeffe's art, iconic buildings are rarely centrally located in Abbott's photographs: instead, they are set aside to give equal attention to other details Abbott finds pleasing, such as skinny and slender minimalist skyscrapers, pointed tops on buildings, and wisps of smoke from chimneys. O'Keeffe painted the Radiator Building as a referential portrait of Stieglitz, adding a cloud of smoke symbolic of herself. Abbott's Radiator is just

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<sup>150</sup> Abbott and McCausland, *Changing New York*, 61.

<sup>151</sup> McEuen, "Modernism Ascendent," 281.

another building standing amongst many other architectural structures, but its distinctive features make it stand out. It does not demand attention, but rather fits in organically among its neighbors. Abbott's photograph of Stettheimer's home, *Facade: Alwyn Court, 174-182 West 58th Street (fig. 28)*, focuses on the symbolic details on the building's facade. Built in 1908. Alwyn Court was a luxurious residence for the wealthy elite of New York City, like the Stettheimer family. Each unit contained thirteen or fourteen rooms, complete with a wine cellar, observatory, and billiards room. However, in 1936, due to the economic collapse, the entire building was remodeled into smaller three and four-bedroom apartments.<sup>152</sup> The Stettheimer's lived in the building before renovations began, and by drawing attention to the grand facade, Abbott seems to remind the viewer of the building's glory days. With crowned salamanders and neo-classical reliefs, the facade oozes opulence.

Like O'Keeffe, Abbott sought to capture the new skyscrapers on the streets of Manhattan from both high and low vantage points. Images like *Canyon: Broadway and Exchange Place (fig. 29)* and *Seventh Avenue Looking South from 35th Street (fig. 30)* share many compositional similarities with O'Keeffe's *City Night (fig. 3)* and *New York, Night (fig. 9)*. Through the title, *Canyon: Broadway and Exchange Place*, Abbott indicates that the canyon-like effect created by the massive buildings is her true subject, and extreme foreshortening produces compositional complexity. By stripping the buildings in *City Night* of their details, O'Keeffe emphasizes the "canyons" effect. Both artists shared an interest in how new architectural forms, especially juxtaposed structures, generated striking linear elements. The dramatic lines formed by broad avenues as well as the commotion of humans moving through the city intrigued them both. In *Seventh Avenue Looking South from 35th Street*, Abbott exploited striking

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<sup>152</sup> Raeburn, "Culture Morphology," 125.  
Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 376.

lighting to highlight the wide avenue. Attempting to achieve a similar effect to O’Keeffe in *New York, Night*, Abbott veiled the buildings along the avenue in darkness, stripping them of distinctive attributes.

Thematically, Abbott and Stettheimer both have an interest in the rampant commercialization rampant of New York’s streets through billboards and advertisements. *Columbus Circle (fig. 31)* by Abbott and *Christmas* by Stettheimer both portray a snowy day. Statues appear in the foreground, and the buildings intermingle with advertisements in the background. Like Stettheimer, Abbott manipulates space in an odd way. She draws attention to the large open spaces of the avenues: we observe men and women as they cross snow covered streets. Advertisements for Coca-Cola and the Broadway musical “At Home Abroad” draw our attention away from the streets and buildings, and by partially obscuring our view behind an advertisement for “Schenley Rye,” Abbott seems to assert that we all participate in consumerism. The billboards provide an ironic contrast to the statue of Christopher Columbus, the apparent discoverer of America, and what his discovery wrought. He could hardly have imagined what this New World would have ultimately come to look like, but his efforts in the end led to the re-shaping of this landscape into architectural and consumerist space. The advertisements dwarfs the statue, encapsulating this sentiment.

Like O’Keeffe and Stettheimer, Abbott faced roadblocks as a marginalized woman artist. Despite her professional successes, she still struggled to command her archive of images. Even when the FAP disbanded in 1938, Abbott still fought to control the more than 300 images amassed over the years while working on the New York project. Her publisher E.P. Dutton sought to place more control over her project than the federal government. He wished to publish her work as a guidebook for visitors to New York’s 1939 World’s Fair, later declaring in the advertising campaign that

*Changing New York* was “for those who love the city and have a romantic interest in its historic past” as well as “for the Visitor from Out-of-Town--the perfect book about New York to take home to friends and family.”<sup>153</sup> However, Abbott’s approach to photography did not translate into an easily accessible tourist guide, and her bold choice of text and image runs counter to his pitch. As she explained, the American city “must be approached with love void of sentimentality, and not solely with criticism and irony” and her approach did not involve catering to an audience that expected predictable photographs.<sup>154</sup> She staunchly defended her vision of producing a photo-book with an untraditional layout and a politically charged text written by her partner, Elizabeth McCausland, challenging her publisher’s conservative attitude. Abbott believed that she had a responsibility to create “the great democratic book” that was capable of “reaching out to a great number of people.”<sup>155</sup> Regardless, the format, captions, layout and included photographs were altered from what Abbott and McCausland originally wanted.<sup>156</sup> McCausland’s original text was stripped of its nuanced social and political rhetoric, leaving behind what Abbott and McCausland considered dry wording that did not correspond with the spirit of the images. Still, even with these substantial editing and cuts, Abbott assembled a set of photographs that represent her unique brand of realist documentary photography. Its democratic spirit remained as a mass produced, relatively inexpensive, and visual book accessible to a wide range of audiences. With these democratic aims for art, Abbott’s artistry differs vastly from O’Keeffe and Stettheimer,

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<sup>153</sup> Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott*, 123.

<sup>154</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 13.

<sup>155</sup> Weissman, “Great Democratic Book”, 22.

<sup>156</sup> Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott*, 125-126.

who created paintings that can either be purchased at a high price, or are not for sale at all, and can only be seen by an exclusive few. Yet, all three of these women worked hard to create admirable solutions for themselves as they kept running up against systemic walls. Abbott's goal of creating "the great democratic book" differed from O'Keeffe's aims of creating paintings that challenged masculine interpretations and asserted her prominence as an artist, while Stettheimer preferred to make vibrant and humorous paintings for an exclusive audience. They operate as individuals with distinct ambitions, creating work that represents their individual artistic goals.

Abbott's comprehensive archive of over three hundred photographs of 1930s New York City deliver many truths. She wanted to create a realistic account of New York for the viewer, a type of truth only achieved through the use of a camera. Her work helped to further legitimize photography as a high art, but at the same time, she used an art form, the photo-book, accessible to the masses. She used the camera, a piece of technology itself, to capture the city's modern advancements, thereby "turn[ing] machines on a machine-made subject."<sup>157</sup> She even gave truth to the urban paintings of Stettheimer and O'Keeffe by photographing the very scenes and subjects that interested them. After finishing the *Changing New York* series, Abbott did not photograph New York again until 1948. She had done her job thoroughly and created a lasting portrait of the city that she believed was "the most phenomenal human gesture ever made."<sup>158</sup> Many artists create individual paintings or small series of their interpretation of the city, but not Abbott. She dedicated a decade of her life to systematically photographing the city's highs and lows, icons and back alleys, new and glorious skyscrapers, and the crumbling brownstone tenements that sit beside them. It is important to remember that

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<sup>157</sup> Anna C. Chave, "'Who Will Paint New York?': 'The World's New Art Center' and the Skyscraper Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe," *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 1991): 90.

<sup>158</sup> Yochelson, *Changing New York*, 31.

Berenice Abbott offered something more -- a complex and critical photographic archive of an increasingly modernizing New York City that will serve as a reminder of things past and a precursor of the innovation that may be yet to come.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

With its seemingly overnight changes, the New York City of the 1920s and 1930s presented a rare opportunity to artists, and these three women seized on the chance to artistically represent a new phenomenon -- the modern city. Painting or photographing it was certainly a daunting task -- the influx of people, new construction, and lively energy was so intoxicating that for many it could prove too much of a challenge to translate into a two-dimensional form; yet, that charge was welcomed by these three women. The urban landscape symbolized a new and exciting boundary that had not yet been successfully crossed, not only by women artists, but also by artists of any gender. Truly representing the modern American spirit meant infusing a scene with what was quickly becoming the quintessential symbol of modernity -- the skyscraper.

Though these three women were very different in terms of their personalities and artistic goals, the urban landscape and their experiences of it as New Women created the opportunity to depict a city in flux. The rapid growth that they encountered inspired all three, and metaphorically connecting the urbanscape to natural and organic growth proved a persistent theme for each during their time in New York City. The city represented social progress and a more egalitarian society that values and respects the rights of all. The allure of societal advancements personified by physical growth made New York City seem intoxicating.

Scholars have written extensively on female artists, reading their work in terms of gendered visual language. My goal is to demonstrate that these three artists operated as individuals with unmistakable professional ambitions. The shared aspect of their

experience, other than the desire to make art, was that they had to deal with significant systemic roadblocks that at times limited their success and threatened to deprive them of the same level of acknowledgement as male artists. Despite these barriers, the three women worked hard to find solutions and to define success on their own terms. For O'Keeffe, this meant developing new work in the form of urban landscapes that could not be gendered by the male art world elite. Stettheimer's definition of success was more personal: she was happy to make art for herself and to share with her peers. She did not desire posterity, but instead wished for her work to be destroyed upon her death. Luckily, her sister preserved her art for future generations.<sup>159</sup> Abbott's interpretation of success was the compiling of a truthful account of the city in metamorphosis through an archive of images. Her aims were democratic, and by creating a book that was accessible to many, her work promoted inclusivity and interconnectedness in a modern world.

New York city's changing topography served as the ultimate playground -- a place for artists to experiment and develop their own style. Within each artist's oeuvre, this period in New York City in the early twentieth century led to the development of a mature artistic style, and pushed each to find her voice and communicate her aspirations to the larger art world. The organic mixing of modern people and structures within an urban setting demanded innovation and inventive creativity, and O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, and Abbott delivered. Their paintings and photographs animate New York City and highlight the inherent complexities of modern life. They demonstrate the city's potential for harmony and agitation, coherence and chaos, but they always show modernizing New York as the ultimate source of inspiration.

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<sup>159</sup> Sussman, "A 1990s Perspective," 54.

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FIGURES



**Figure 1.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *From the Lake No. 1*, 1924. Oil on canvas.



**Figure 2.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *New York Street with Moon*, 1925. Oil on canvas.



**Figure 3.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *City Night*, 1926. Oil on canvas.



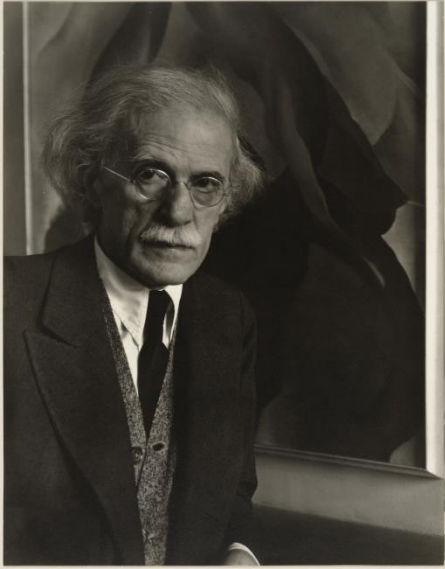
**Figure 4.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *Radiator Building--New York, Night*, 1927. Oil on canvas.



**Figure 5.** Jean-Christophe Benoit, *NYC - American Radiator Building*, 2012. Digital photograph.



**Figure 6.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *The Shelton with Sunspots*, 1926. Oil on canvas.



**Figure 7.** Imogen Cunningham, *Alfred Stieglitz*, 1934. Gelatin Silver Print.



**Figure 8.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *East River from the 30th Story of the Shelton Hotel*, 1928.

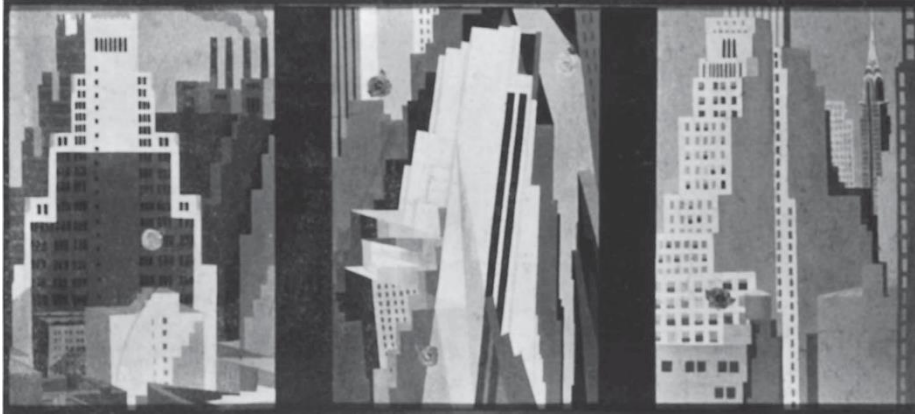
Oil on canvas.



**Figure 9.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *New York, Night*, 1928-9. Oil on canvas.



**Figure 10.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *Manhattan*, 1932. Oil on canvas.



**Figure 11.** Georgia O'Keeffe, *Study for Three-Part Commission, Manhattan*, 1932.



**Figure 12.** Florine Stettheimer, *Family Portrait I*, 1915.



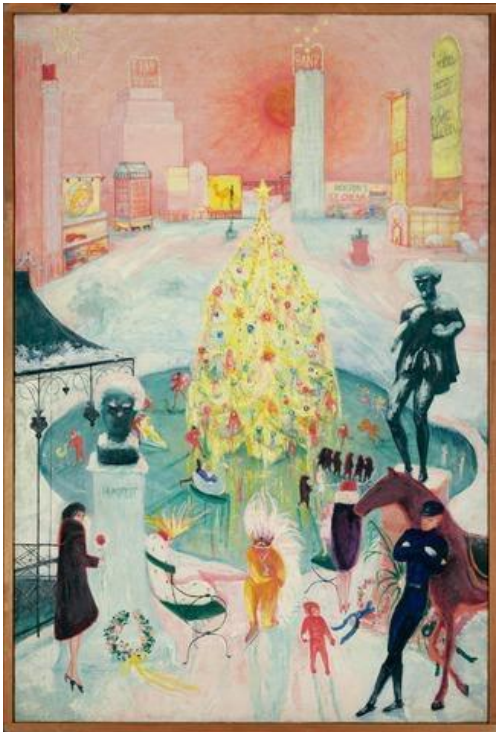
**Figure 13.** Florine Stettheimer, *Soirée/Studio Party*, 1917-19.



**Figure 14.** Florine Stettheimer, *New York/Liberty*, 1918-20.



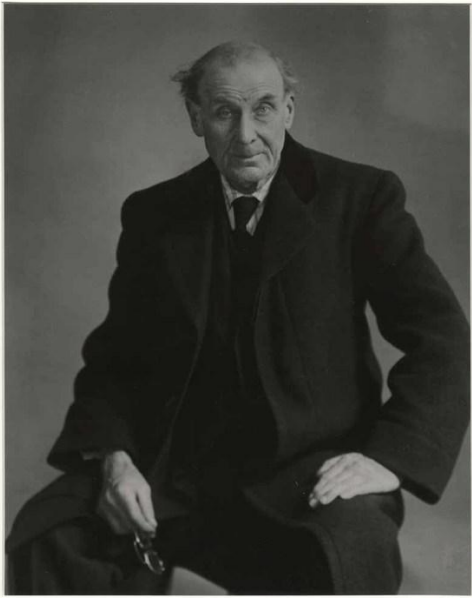
**Figure 15.** Florine Stettheimer, *Portrait of Alfred Stieglitz*, 1928.



**Figure 16.** Florine Stettheimer, *Christmas*, 1930-40.



**Figure 17.** Florine Stettheimer, *Family Portrait II*, 1933.



**Figure 18.** Berenice Abbott. *Eugene Atget*. 1927. Gelatin silver print.



**Figure 19.** Eugène Atget. *Door, Hôtel de Cluny*. 1898.



**Figure 20.** Berenice Abbott. *South and DePeyster Streets*. 1935



**Figure 21.** Lewis Hine. *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper*. 1932.



**Figure 22.** Berenice Abbott. *Broadway to the Battery*. 1938.



**Figure 23.** Berenice Abbott. *DePeyster Statue, Bowling Green.* 1936.



**Figure 24.** Berenice Abbott. *Downtown Skyport, Foot of Wall Street.* 1936.



**Figure 25.** Berenice Abbott. *Washington Square, Looking North.* 1936.



**Figure 26.** Berenice Abbott. *Fortieth Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues.* 1938.



**Figure 27.** Berenice Abbott. *Fortieth Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.* 1938.



**Figure 28.** Berenice Abbott. *Facade: Alwyn Court, 174-182 West 58th Street.* 1938.



**Figure 29.** Berenice Abbott. *Canyon: Broadway and Exchange Place.* 1936.



**Figure 30.** Berenice Abbott. *Seventh Avenue Looking South from 35th Street.* 1935.



**Figure 31.** Berenice Abbott. *Columbus Circle*. 1935.