

## Georgia O’Keeffe: The Faraway Nearby

From the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico

The beauty and elegance of Georgia O’Keeffe’s New Mexico paintings were prompted by the intimacy of her experience with the natural forms of the American Southwest. Further from home, she made repeated camping trips to draw and paint at extraordinary sites including Glen Canyon, Utah, and New Mexico sites that she referred to as the “White Place” and the “Black Place.” This exhibition presents a selection of fifty pieces of camping gear belonging to O’Keeffe, from her flashlight to her Stanley thermos.

Without modern amenities like GPS or four-wheel drive, O’Keeffe would travel in her Model-A Ford to find inspiration, driving along dirt roads. When she arrived at her destination she would remove the driver’s seat, unbolt the passenger’s seat and turn it around, using the back seat as her easel. Using this system, she could accommodate canvases up to 30 x 40 inches and escape the sun and biting insects.

O’Keeffe first saw the spectacular New Mexico landscape she called the Black Place in 1935. Located on federal land in Navajo country and about 150 miles northwest of her home, it was a stretch of desolate gray and black hills that the artist said looked from a distance like “a mile of elephants.”

The long drive from her home at Ghost Ranch to the Black Place made it an impossible day trip; painting and drawing the barren hills required overnight camping. Between 1936 and 1949, the artist returned many times to create more than a dozen major works inspired by the astonishing landscape, isolated far off the road and away from towns or villages. She produced more than a dozen drawings, pastels, and some of her best-known paintings at the Black Place.

## Camping at the Black Place

I must have seen the Black Place first driving past on a trip to Navajo country and, having seen it, I had to go back to paint—even in the heat of mid-summer. It became one of my favorite places to work. It almost looks like a mile of elephants—grey hills all about the same size with almost white sand at their feet.

Georgia O’Keeffe, 1944

The town of Nageezi, New Mexico, is one of the gateways to Chaco Culture National Historic Park. It is located just a few miles northwest of the roadside turnout along the State Highway that Georgia O’Keeffe used when she painted her Black Place series. A lover of the great outdoors, she camped in this spot for days at a time, enduring fierce winds, coyotes, and withering sun. During the heat of the day she would slide underneath “Hello”—the name O’Keeffe gave to her Model-A Ford—and nap on the cool, shaded ground.

In the early 1940s, O’Keeffe often camped with her assistant, Marie Chabot. In 1944, the year the painting *Black Place II* was made, Chabot described in words what O’Keeffe captured in paint: “...the black hills—black and grey and silver with arroyos of white sand curving around them—pink and white strata running through them. They flow downward, one below the next. Incredible stillness!”

Today, the landscape that inspired O’Keeffe has dramatically changed. The Black Place is surrounded by evidence of the world’s energy needs: oil rigs, pipelines, and fracking remnants dot the once pristine landscape.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Place II*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 23-7/8 x 30 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection

(this image embedded in the Camping text panel)

In vinyl (for identifying the large photomurals):

*"Black Place," New Mexico*, 2008. Photography by Liz Ehrnst. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

Maria Chabot. *Georgia O'Keeffe, Breakfast, The Black Place*, 1944. Gelatin silver print, 5 x 3 1/2 inches. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Gift of Maria Chabot. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

Quotes (in vinyl):

Maybe it seems mad...that I go out like this and live out under the stars and the sky for a few days—but I am like that.

Georgia O'Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz, 1940

It is a place where black lava meets white earth that might be volcanic ash—and the white earth is washed into all part of fantastic shapes—tall cliffs—pillars—and sometimes it looks like long folds of white drapery dropping out of the sky. There are miles of it.

Georgia O'Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz, 1940

Such a beautiful—untouched lonely feeling place—such a fine part of what I call the 'Faraway.' It is a place I have painted before but I wanted to do again—and even now I must do it again.

Georgia O'Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz, 1943