

# Georgia O'Keefe

**Born:** November 15, 1887, Wisconsin

**Active:** 1916 - ca.1982

**Died:** March 6, 1986, Santa Fe, New Mexico<sup>1</sup>

## Interesting Facts about O'Keefe

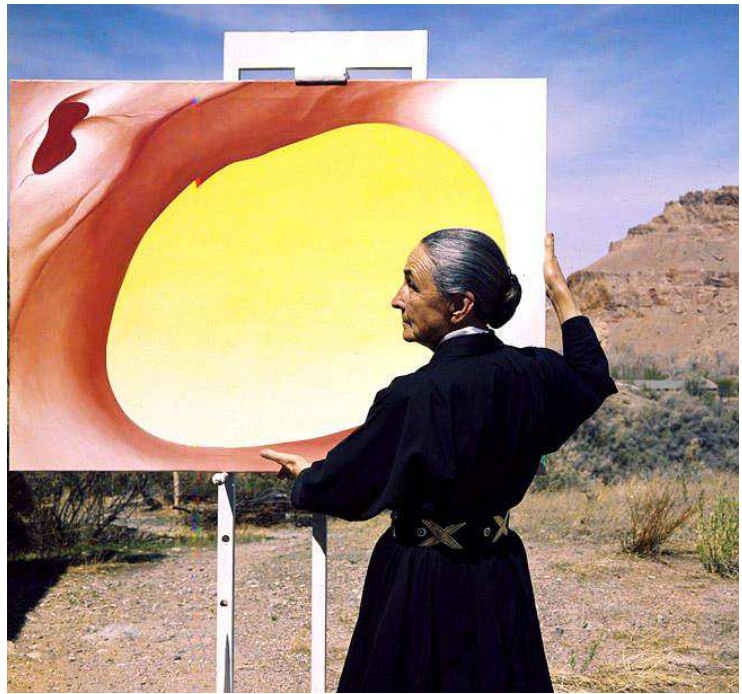
-While she is most famous for her oversized, close-up paintings of flowers, these comprise only 10% of her work. She created over 2,000 canvases during her career, only around 200 are flowers. She also painted landscapes, cityscapes, bone studies, and abstract works.

-O'Keefe started in watercolors, but, since it was considered the paints of "amateurs", she was advised by gallery owners to switch to oils, the paint of "serious artists" instead.

-O'Keefe started to go blind in 1972, and painted her last unassisted painting that year. She hired an assistant to help stretch canvases, and mix oil paints, which helped her keep painting for several years. Later she returned to watercolors and finally sculpture, until she had to quit altogether when she was 95 years old.<sup>2</sup>

-In 1946, O'Keefe became the first female artist to get her own retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

-When she lived in New Mexico, she converted her car into a studio. She would paint inside her car so she was shielded from the harshest of the desert sun while she painted her landscapes. She also camped throughout New Mexico, (well into her 70s!) to see the landscapes which inspired her. Through it all, she painted in every sort of weather: under a tarp during driving rain, while wearing gloves in the freezing cold, in the shade in the driving sun.



*Figure 1: Georgia O'Keefe in 1960, photographed by Tony Vaccaro for an article in Look Magazine (the same Magazine Norman Rockwell worked at in his later years). The painting she's holding is "Pelvis Series, Red and Yellow" (1945). The viewer is looking through the Iliac arch of a large pelvis, but O'Keefe's paintings focused on the form and line of this close-up view. She treated bones like her flowers: up close, personal, and focusing on the beauty of the form.*

<sup>1</sup> Cycle 3, Week 8 Geography link!

<sup>2</sup> This makes her similar to Edgar Degas, (Cycle 2, Week 17-famous for ballet dancers) who switched from oil paints to pastels, when his eyes began to lose the ability to see detail, then from pastels to sculpture when his vision failed. Losing a tool of one's trade doesn't mean you lose your ability to create, you just create a new avenue of creativity. (Grandma Moses also changed her medium: she switched from embroidery to painting when her arthritis made sewing too difficult!)

## O'Keefe's work is often categorized as **American Modernism**:

But even here, she's hard to define. Most Modernist artists created purely abstract works, trying to remove all definable imagery. Others focused on how war and industrialization was altering, or destroying, culture. While the bulk of O'Keefe's works are abstracts, she also created very recognizable works, such as the flowers, bones, and landscapes.

However, her abstracts never caught on the way her flowers and landscapes did. Her colors, techniques, and combinations of forms were so unusual, they were marks of her style. Since she worked during the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern movement, this is where her works land on an art timeline.

Still, many consider her work so unique to her, it can only be categorized as "O'Keefe."

## Etymology:

### Modernism (n.)

The word "*Modernism*" originated in 1737, and means "a deviation from the ancient and classical manner." Samuel Johnson, creator of the first modern English dictionary, credited (or perhaps, blamed!) satirist writer Johnathan Swift for inventing the word. From 1830 forward it meant, "in modern ways and styles", and has made its way into art, philosophy and even theological movements.

*Modern* (adj.) comes from the 1500s Middle-French word *moderne*, meaning "pertaining to present or recent times". This word came from the Late Latin term *modern* (which meant the same thing), it comes from the classical Latin term *modo* (Ablative form: *modus*) meaning "Just now [done] in a certain manner." Shakespeare used the word "modern" as a slang term to mean every-day, ordinary, or common.

The term "Modern Art" was first coined in 1807.

Definition compiled from the Online Etymology Dictionary, [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

## Quotes from O'Keefe

*"I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do." -Georgia O'Keefe*

*"Nobody sees a flower - really - it is so small it takes time - we haven't time - and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time." -Georgia O'Keefe*

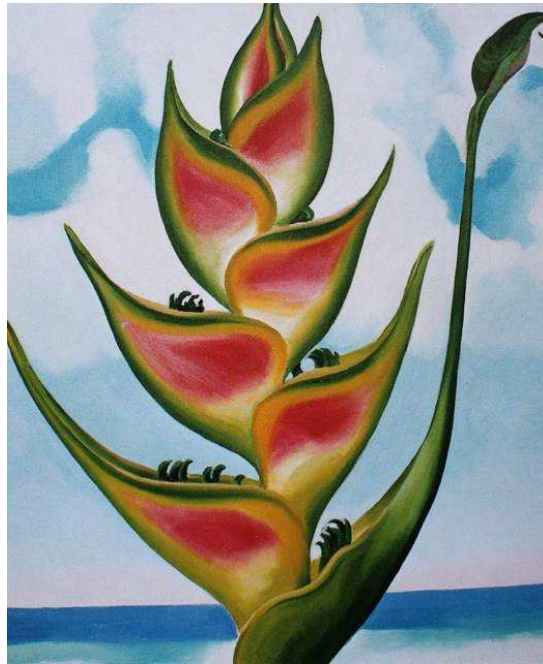


*Figure 2: Jimson Weed No. 1 (1932). This painting sold in 2014 to Alice Walton (heiress of Walmart) for \$44.4 million, making this the highest priced painting by a female artist ever sold at auction. Earlier, this painting hung in the White House during the George W. Bush administration at the request of Laura Bush. Walton subsequently donated the painting to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, which Walton helped found. In 2016, this painting was displayed in the Tate Gallery, London, as part of a Georgia O'Keeffe show in the United Kingdom.*





On the left, Pelvis IV, 1944, oil on Board; 36 x 40 in.; Georgia O'Keefe Museum, Santa Fe, NM. On the right, Red Canna (1924) Georgia O'Keefe. Fair Use



On the left, "Poppy IV" (1927); on the right, "Heliconia" (1939). Fair use.

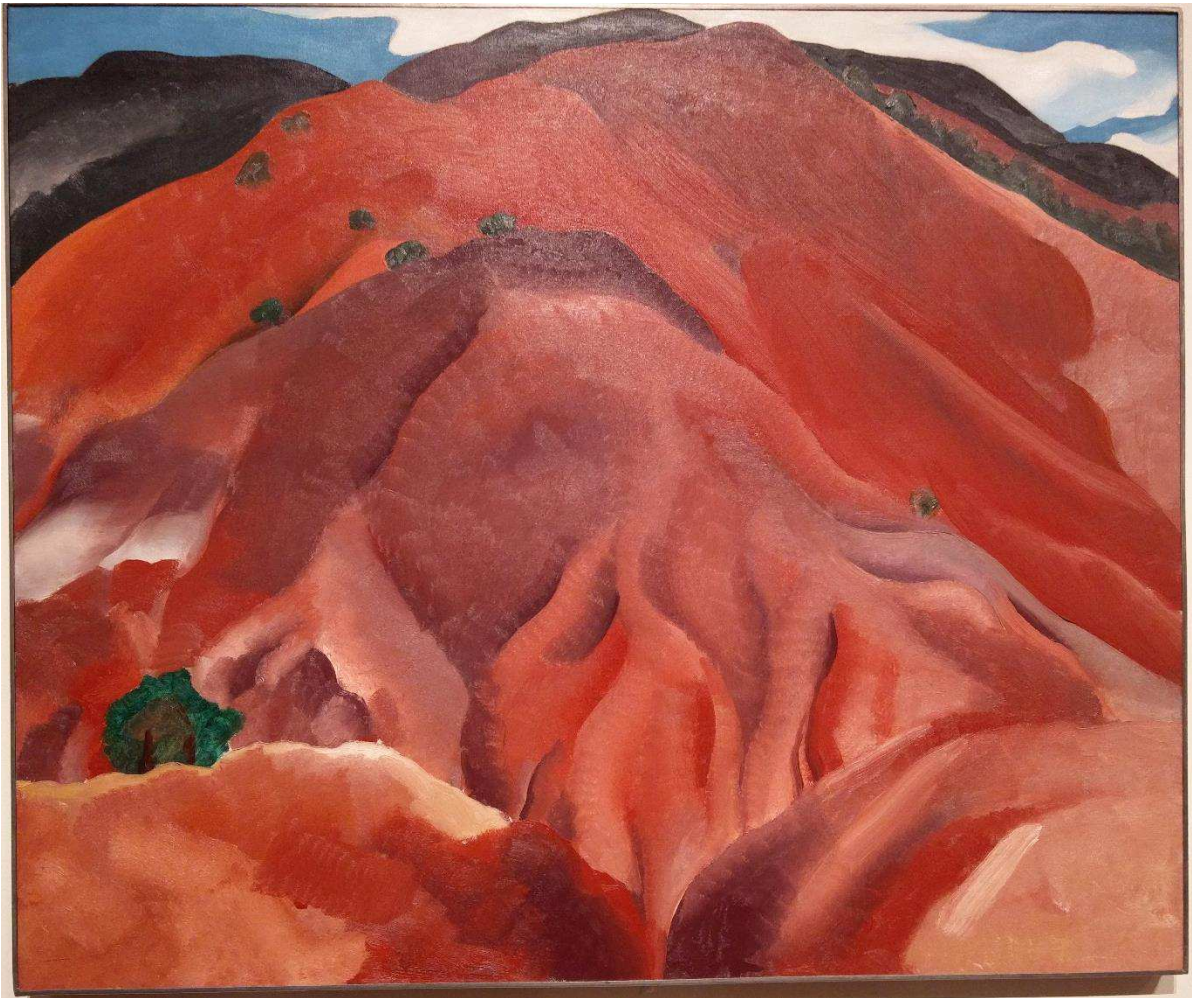


Top Left: Black hollyhock, blue Larkspur, Georgia O'Keefe 1930. Fair Use

Right: Black Pansy and Forget Me Nots; Georgia O'Keefe; 192; Oil on Canvas. 27" X 12". Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY.

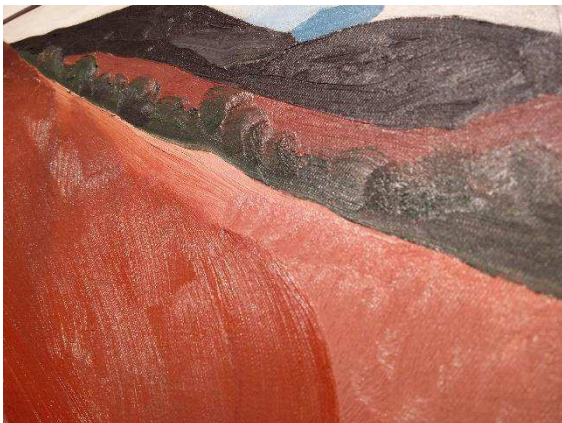
Bottom Left: "Leaves of a Plant" (a Bromeliad) (1942)





Above, *Red Hills beyond Abiquiu*, 1930. Oil on Canvas. Eiteljorg Museum of Native Americans and Western Art, Indianapolis Indiana. Below, on the left, detail of the tree ridge in "*Red Hills*" upper right corner. Below on the right, detail of the tree in the lower left corner. Note the loose brush strokes and swirls O'Keeffe used to create her "trees" and "ridges". Photo: R.J. Hughes, 2018

The Eiteljorg posted the following quote from O'Keeffe with this beautiful landscape: "A red hill doesn't touch everyone's heart as it touches mine and I suppose there is no reason why it should. The red hill is a piece of the badlands where even the grass is gone. Badlands roll away outside my door-hill after hill..."





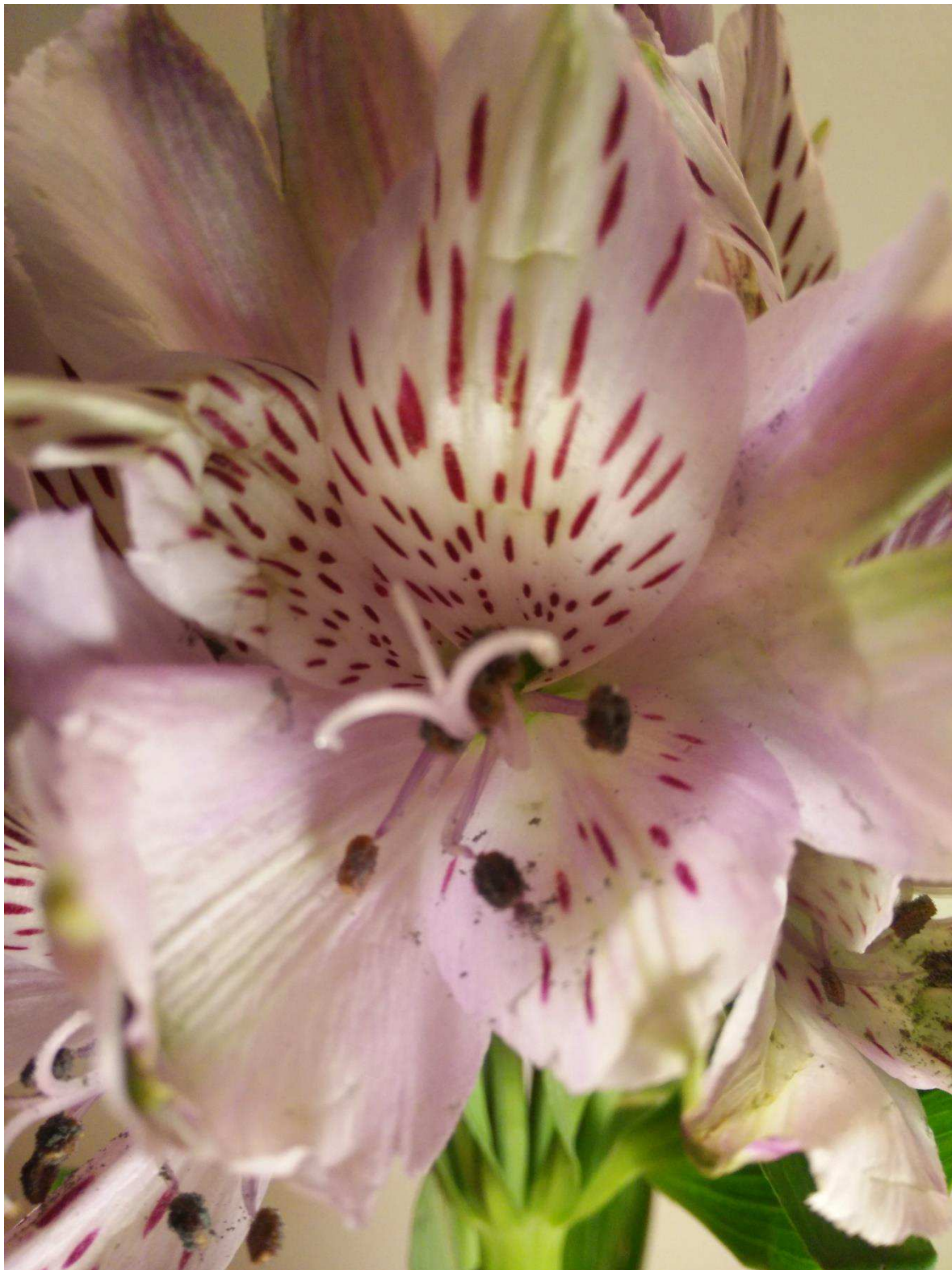


Japanese Iris; Photograph by R.J. Hughes; 2017.



Lily in a Vase; Photo by R.J. Hughes; 2017





"Alstroemeria" Photo by R.J. Hughes; 2017



"Daisey" Photo by r.J. Hughes; 2017





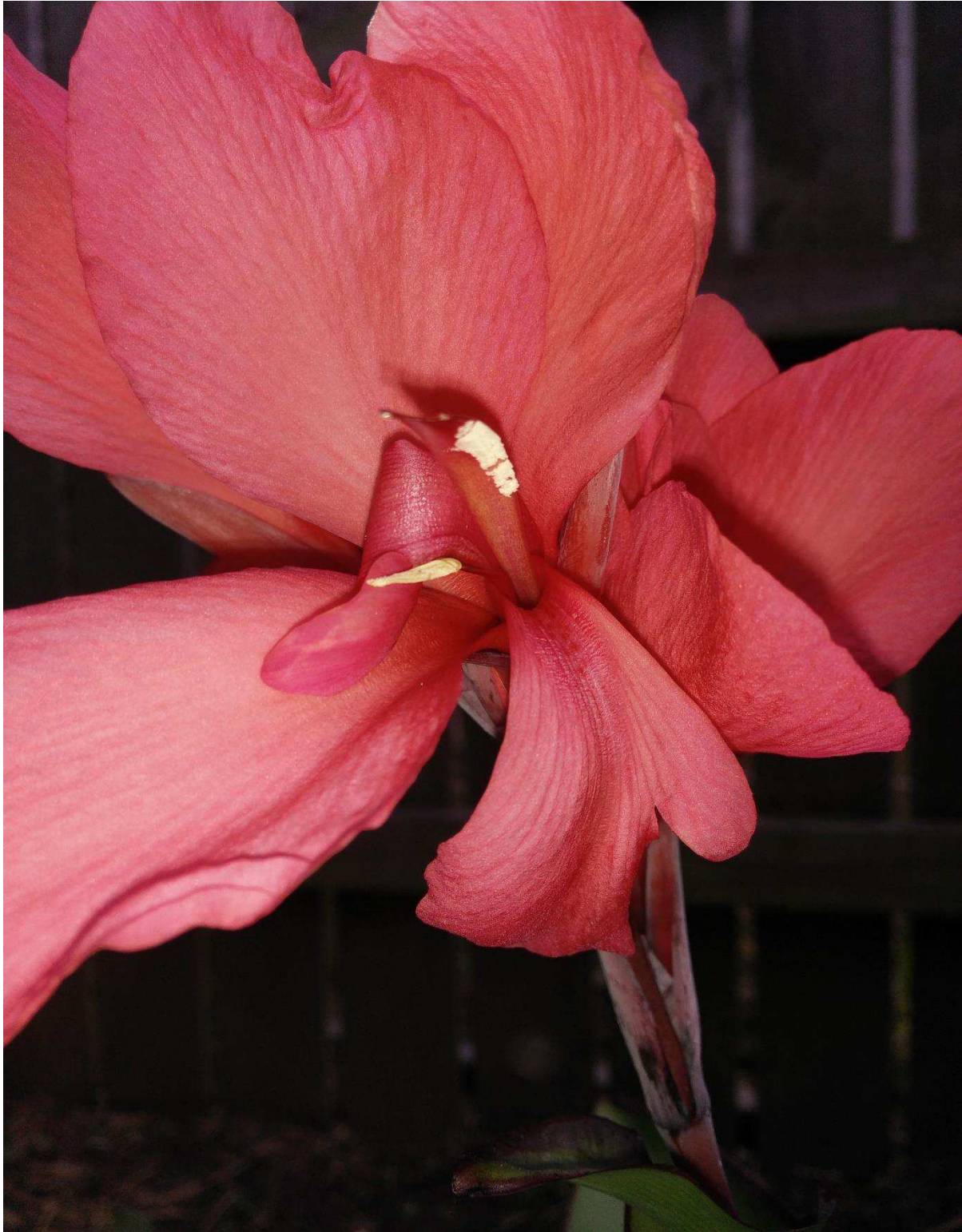
"Kalanchoe" Photo by R.J. Hughes; 2017





"Petunia" Photo by R.J. Hughes; 2017





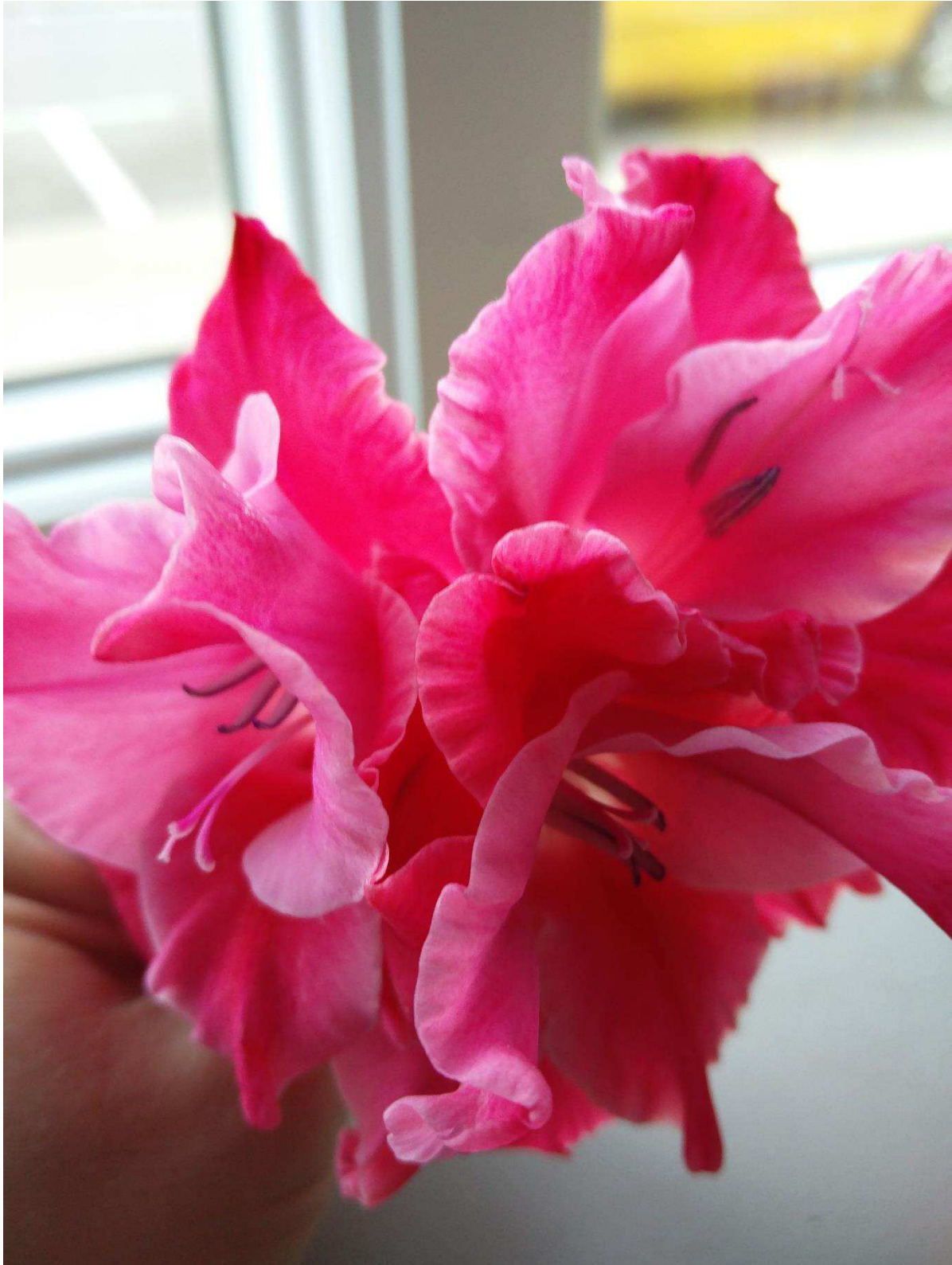
"Red Canna" Photo by R.J. Hughes; 2017



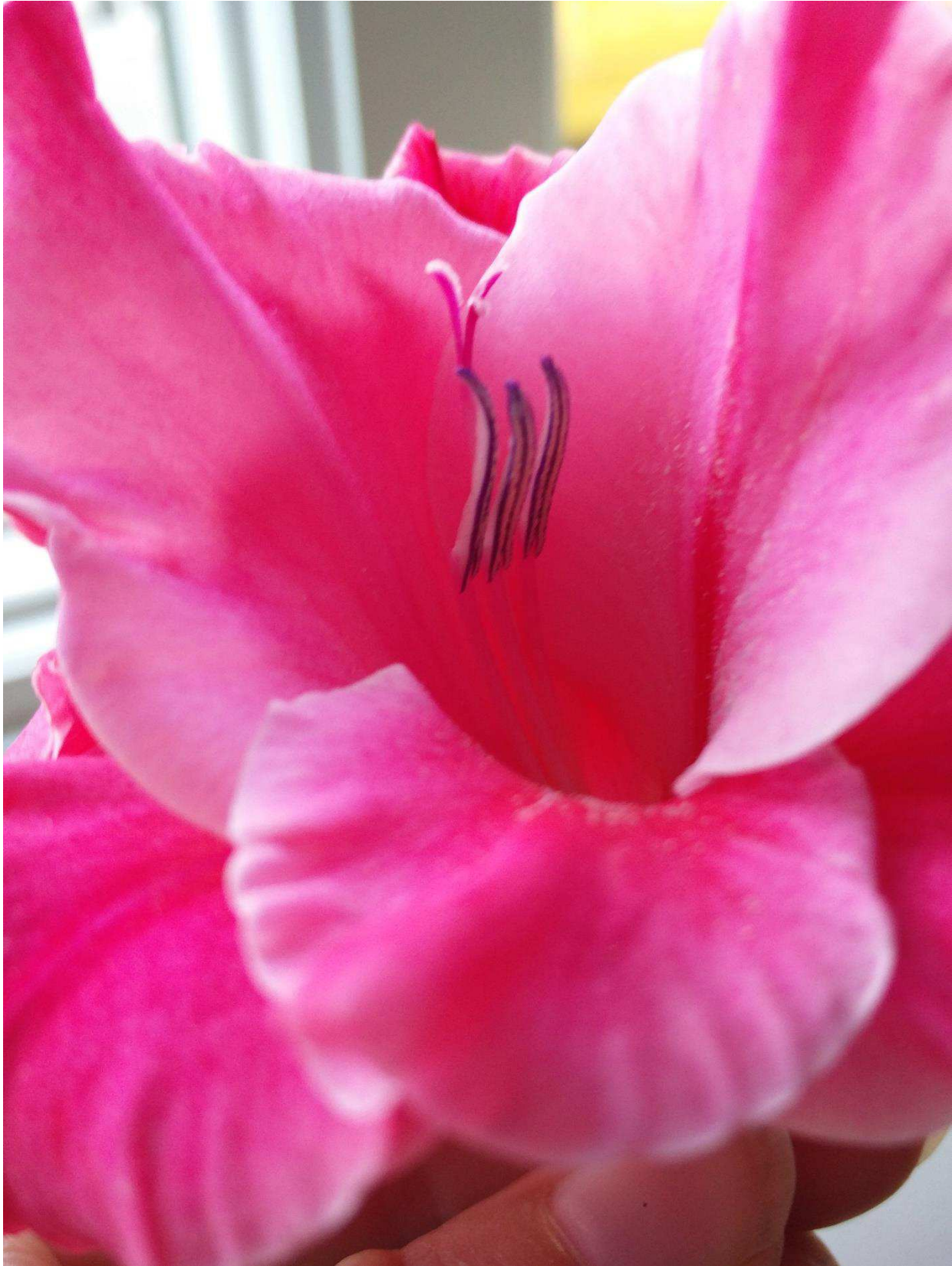


"Hibiscus" Photo by R.J. Hughes, 2017





"Gladiola" Photo by R.J. Hughes, 2017



"Gladiolous" Photo by R.J. Hughes, 2017.



## Take Home

Georgia O'Keefe's work was both detailed and loose. It was detailed because a single bloom could fill the entire canvas, forcing the viewer to see each petal, stamen, or pistil in detail. It was loose because she blended colors and omitted some of the miniscule details like veins and blemishes, choosing to focus on the shape, colors, and form of her work. She often used vivid, bold colors to paint what she was seeing.

So, use photos of flowers or plants (or houseplants, or bouquet flowers, or the photos in this tutorial) and try to fill a page with the details and colors of a single bloom or section of plant! Or, look out your window to paint a landscape. You can even look at photographs of natural wonders which inspire you, and fill the page with them.

### Books:

Getting to Know the World Great Artists: Georgia O'Keefe by Mike Venezia

Through Georgia's Eyes, by Rachel Victoria Rodriguez, Julie Paschkis (Illustrations) *(younger children may prefer this one, though there are fewer direct images of O'Keefe's work)*

### Online Gallery:

Wikiart.org has a gallery of some of O'Keefe's works: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/georgia-o-keeffe>

### Field Trips:

O'Keefe was an artist who was popular before she died, and as a result, many museums have pieces by her. In addition to the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, these museums also have multiple O'Keefe works in their holdings:

- The Georgia O'Keefe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico
- National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C
- Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio
- Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York
- San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, California
- Art Institute of Chicago

A more complete listing of where O'Keefe's art is displayed can be found in this listing, including many institutions with one or two pieces listed in their collections:

<http://www.georgia-okeeffe.com/museums.html>

As always, call before you visit to make sure any piece you want to see is on display. Museums routinely rotate exhibits, loan pieces out for traveling exhibitions, or remove pieces for conservation or storage.