# soft minimalism: georgia o'keeffe's aesthetics of photographic personhood

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## abstract

American artist Georgia O'Keeffe's iconic interior design sensibilities are nowhere more fully expressed than within the adobe walls of her home in Abiquiú, New Mexico. A novel intersection of American Southwest, Japanese, and Modernist styles, in the decades following the house's renovation in 1949, O'Keeffe invited photographers into her home, and turned the house into an influential site for the production and distribution of images of a highly marketable desert asceticism. Her photographic archive spanned seventy-five years, appearing in publications ranging from *House Beautiful* (1963) to *Cereal* (2017). Yet, despite their wide distribution and lasting influence, these photos resulted in something far more complex than appears to have been initially intended.

Both during and after her life, photographs of the Abiquiú home and O'Keeffe's persona became coterminous in the public consciousness, even without her presence in the photographic frame. In the contemporary context of digital images, the photographs of Abiquiú's interiors — enmeshed with O'Keeffe's personality — serve as a strangely prescient fable for how we would come to reconstruct ourselves as images and to reconceive ourselves as environmentally entangled persons. It is here that we find one consequential source point for the creation of a new kind of aspirational being in the digital age — a self formed at the nexus of body, domestic interior, and photograph.

This essay explores how O'Keeffe, and her photographic collaborators, used the mediation of interior images to cultivate her public persona and to produce, in turn, a new scenography of American womanhood. It examines how the proliferation of her photogenic aesthetics of desert living served as an embryonic analogue to the hyper-mediation of our digital subjectivities in today's attention economy. In Abiquiú's photographs we discover a novel use for interior photography in which the self is recovered and reconstituted within the dehumanising glare of the camera.

## keywords

Georgia O'Keeffe; minimalism; embodiment; phenomenology; architectural photography

**cite as:**
Chris Fernald, 'Soft Minimalism: Georgia O'Keeffe's Aesthetics of Photographic Personhood', *Idea Journal*, 23.2 (2026), pp. 44–56, doi.org/10.37113/ij.v23i2.644.

## introduction

Braiding together an original mix of ascetic sensibilities from twentieth-century modernist design, traditional Japanese aesthetics, and the architectural vernaculars of desert regions the world over, American artist Georgia O'Keeffe's home at Abiquiú, New Mexico (1945) constitutes a distinctly austere decorative style. Thanks in no small part to her willingness to open her doors to photojournalists in her later life, and to the posthumous transformation of her home into a popular house museum, her domestic aesthetic has blossomed into one of the predominant minimalist interior design vernaculars in the US of the last fifteen years. We might call this design sensibility 'soft minimalism.'

Today, soft minimalism comprises a gestalt so seamless that we tend to forget its patchwork of aesthetic references or its possible origins in O'Keeffe's desert hacienda. In more recent years, terms like 'Santa Fe Modern', 'Japandi', 'Pacific Natural', and 'Marfa Modern' have been cast like linguistic nets, hoping to encircle the same aesthetic sensibilities.[1] Yet, neither these terms nor their reportage offer a proper historicisation of this strain of minimalism. Instead, they seem to imply, by omission, that its characteristics have only entwined in recent years. Despite this, when we review, for instance, Instagram photos of Athena Calderone's latest rug collection, browse images of the Cycladic islands, Ibiza, or Utah's Amangiri desert resort, or peruse the décor arrangements of Colin King's interiors, we do not experience the birth of a novel aesthetic but rather echoes of its resurrection.

From the styling of New York fashion and lifestyle boutiques like La Garçonne to international corporations like Zara Home; from HGTV home renovations to even sci-fi blockbusters like Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) or *Dune* (2021), Abiquiú's soft minimalism is apparent in the current social imaginary of desert dwellings and coastal homes. While the path of O'Keeffe's influence upon these expressions cannot be literally traced in every instance, the fact remains that a sensibility she cultivated with artful deliberation has seen tremendous proliferation in recent years, producing secondary examples that, in turn, beget influence to new audiences and new creations.

The year 2017 seems to have marked a particular high point of interest in and acknowledgement of O'Keeffe not as an artist but also as a designer and stylist. That year, scholar and curator Wanda Corn performed a much-needed triage upon the artist's creative legacy, marshalling this long-simmering interest in her private life into an exhibition called *Living Modern*.[2] This travelling show debuted at the Brooklyn Museum before appearing at a handful of other American institutions.[3] By including her clothes and a limited range of domestic effects, *Living Modern* suggested that O'Keeffe treated her personal sartorial sensibility and domestic flair with an intention and innovation equal to her famous paintings. That year would also see O'Keeffe's interior designs featured in P. Gayle Tapp's *How They Decorated: Inspiration from Great Women of the Twentieth Century*, along with a number of periodicals including *Fathom*, *AnOther Magazine*, *New Mexico Magazine*, *Kinfolk*, and the bible of living minimally, *Cereal*.[4] An Arizona home reportedly inspired by Abiquiú in *Dezeen* and *Home Journal*, would follow in 2019.[5] Aside from mainstream publications and the countless built spaces that echo this aesthetic, there is also the truly unquantifiable proliferation of photographs of her home and likeness across social media prior to and after the exhibition and subsequent publication of these articles. Yet a substantive theorisation as to why her particular interior design philosophy should see tremendous spread today remains strangely missing not only from *Living Modern* and its exhibition text, but from this wider field of publications more generally.

Thus, the question arises: why should this aesthetic, formed decades ago in the remote hinterlands of New Mexico by one of the twentieth century's most famous artists, transform over the past 20 years into a popular global design vernacular? What currency do images of soft minimalism hold in today's desire

economy? And what role does an increasingly photographic world play in resurrecting O'Keeffe's aesthetic paradigm?

This essay looks beyond the usual platitudes about why decorative minimalism attracts so many contemporary Western subjects. Building upon the body of research devoted to architectural photography by scholars such as Claire Zimmerman, Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, Charles Rice, and Dave Loder, it brings greater scrutiny to the media landscape in which images of Abiquiú and its aesthetic relations appear. Specifically, it considers O'Keeffe's work in the context of a semio-capitalist condition that, as Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has theorised, reshapes human consciousness in historically unprecedented fashion.[6] Treating the contemporary aesthetic subject as a technologically and economically contingent entity, the essay considers how architectural photography may both reflect and influence the contemporary self-image of their viewing subject, their aspirations, and their identity. In other words, the answer to why we see today's widespread adoption of O'Keeffe's aesthetics may lie in examining how our late-capitalist, image-saturated culture may create new desires for definition and self-hood which we turn to architectural and interior photography to satisfy — desires that O'Keeffe's decorative vernacular appears uncommonly capable of satiating. In this telling, a complex passage from O'Keeffe's life offers a fable — or premonition — for how both soft minimalism and the interior architectural image would come to function in the present.

This essay offers sustained and critical descriptive attention to the distinct, highly pervasive decorative vernacular of soft minimalism. It unpacks soft minimalism by narrativising the motivations and results of O'Keeffe's decision to publicise her private interiors. Additionally, it draws upon the work of digital theorists and media scholars to speculate upon the appeal of this aesthetic and the reason for its spread. The essay also reframes this investigation in terms of a wider techno-medial change in human consciousness and widespread practices of identity performance online that use architectural and locational data. Lastly, it groups these threads together to posit a novel theory of the function of the soft minimalist architectural image in the present. And, rather than perpetuate the proliferation of more photography of O'Keeffe's interiors, it leaves the remarkable imagery of these environments for the reader themselves to discover.

## the o'keeffe aesthetic: soft minimalism's formulas

While her New Mexico homes would prove to be sites of continual interest and investment for Georgia O'Keeffe over the decades, the central fulcrum of her aesthetic — the pairing of austere, elegantly impoverished vernaculars of desert civilisations with the stuff of modern design — endures in every iteration. Indeed, the home's consistency of expression across time — and its synchrony with her fashion and artwork — suggest a stable framework within which O'Keeffe expressed herself toward all horizons of her life.[7] Drawing upon the decades-spanning photographic archive of the home's interiors, we may infer the existence of a number of principles that guided O'Keeffe's design sensibility, and the soft minimalist expressions emerging in its wake today.

Soft minimalism borrows aesthetic hallmarks from modernism — namely emptiness, economy of form, an eased boundary between outside and in, and narrow and neutral colour palettes — and sutures them to the adobe ranch of the American Southwest and the time-tempered woods and papers of a Japanese teahouse. In photographs of Abiquiú, we find sparse, light-filled rooms softly blanketed in desaturated earth tones and whites, leavened by the weightless Zen of a paper Noguchi lamp, warmed in the ruddy geometric abstractions of Diné textiles, and disciplined by the mechanical rigour of an Eames chair. There is a sense of wabi-sabi's ennobled wear and exquisite poverty at Abiquiú and its soft minimalist descendants,

where totems of conspicuous consumption are supplanted by sacral displays of imperfect, time-worn objects. A sense of the slowness of geologic time pervades soft minimalist space, with artifacts from the natural world like driftwood, animal skeletons, stones, and shells anchoring its rooms like stakes in a tent. Acting as apparent souvenirs from a practice of desert wandering, such relics suggest a sense of wonder with the minutiae of the world that has survived the deadening assault of the contemporary, the technological, and the cheap abundance of mass production. In this way, the contemporary soft minimalist suggests a figure from an earlier age wondrously appearing in our own. It is a figure that has preserved, or retrieved, a way of seeing that has been seemingly lost to much of the modern Western world.

Despite O'Keeffe's lifelong commitment to the project of modernism, and her impressive collection of modernist design masterpieces from the twentieth century, her domestic sensibilities are characterised by neither masculinist heroism nor mechanical fetishism. Emerging in the wake of modernism's initial polemics, O'Keeffe's soft minimalist space is not Le Corbusier's sterling, chrome-plated 'machine for living.'[8] Instead, linen cushions, dirt-caked ceramic pots, animal skeletons, and a range of vernacular woods and adobe soften modernist space's alleged disdain for history and the human body with a sense of intimacy, mysticism, humility, and regionality, offering a complementary yet distinct vision of idealised personhood. Soft minimalism sweeps away modernism's opposing desires — its humanist intent and fantasies of domination — to uncover the eros it only ever barely suppressed: an ascetic's longing for bodily and worldly withdrawal.

Abiquiú's initial construction and decoration occurred during a postwar transition, where pre-war and interwar modernism flowed across the Atlantic into what was contemporaneously termed 'humanized Modernism' in the US.[9] The soft minimalism of O'Keeffe resonated with what by 1949 — the year that the home's renovation was completed — was already a well-known caricature of an increasingly 'organic' and 'human' postwar modern interior.[10] Indeed, many of O'Keeffe's sensibilities align with many hallmarks that stayed consistent with modernist interiors, while incorporating local Southwestern vernaculars and her personal interests. Ironically, these inclusions and adaptations would ultimately allow O'Keeffe to transcend historical clichés, while producing the new cliché of soft minimalism as a contemporary signpost for luxury, austerity, and refinement.[11]

Soft minimalist space tends to possess a relatively narrow colour palette, one composed primarily of white and accented by a range of browns, grays, pinks, and clays. Black may be a supporting colour, but the space is more likely to evoke the feeling of the desert during the daytime than during its shadow hours. O'Keeffe consistently designed within these colours, a palette seemingly gleaned from the rocks and soils of the New Mexico landscape around her. But with white as her home's most prominent and foundational colour, O'Keeffe's interiors also evoke the muted sensorium of a silent, snow-crested desert. Nearly every room in the home, from walls, floors, and ceilings to chairs, tables, and appliances, adheres to this narrow palette, with the artist's studio offering a particularly strong example of her rigorous chromatic discipline.

In soft minimalism, the straight lines and rigid angles attributed to modernism tend to dominate the silhouettes of its furniture and its rooms. Yet, the strictness of 'the grid' is never sacrosanct; in fact, we often find it fluctuating under the influence of an errant curve or breaking wave. In the Abiquiú House, for instance, the office and sitting area are a symphony of muted rectangular planes that refract the proportions of what is arguably the room's visual and practical focus — O'Keeffe's self-designed plywood worktables. A number of interior features echo and enhance its geometric properties: the two weathered wood doors that bookmark the office; the bright, gauzy-

edged rectangles of the skylights folded into the grid of the traditional wooden ceiling; and the large, un-paned windows that frame the outside landscape. And yet, the room feels at peace in large part due to the understatement with which it expresses its geometries. In tracing the spread of rectangular forms in the open spaces of the studio, we see modernism's indicative geometries on full display. In comparison to the flat planes of the room's principle features — the shelves, the desks, the armoire, the doors, and even the skylights and bank of fluorescent lights above — rounded forms are supporting players in this composition. They appear mainly in the sitting area in smaller and shyer guises than their more angular counterparts, including a white O'Keeffe sculpture, two cattle horns, and a Saarinen Tulip Table blending into the white surfaces behind them. When we examine the space for its minor key of curving lines and uneven forms, the room shifts into soft minimalism's particular geometric disposition. Like a breast pressed from the punitive constraints of a corset, O'Keeffe's studio constricts, but never fully conceals, the organic, the soft, the circular, and the fleshy.

Among the most distinguishing qualities of soft minimalism is a commitment to preserving pools of 'emptiness' in interior spaces. As curators and artists working in the 'white cube' exhibition space, and as fashion brands such as Issey Miayke, Calvin Klein, and Giorgio Armani well know, an inverse relationship exists between the amount of space around an object and its perceived value. As scholar Penny Sparke notes, 'the mere possession of minimally styled domestic furniture items fabricated in modern materials was sufficient to denote the presence of "art" or "value" in that interior.'[12] Such styling conventions are likely the legacy of staging practices that inaugurated some of modernist architecture's first photographs, where photographers and architects sought to imply human life with only the barest of props and furnishings. Examples of styling exercises within the photographic record of Le Corbusier's villas, for example, include a pair of *Corbusien* sunglasses, hat, and two small packages on a rooftop table at Villa Savoye; a lonely loaf of bread and teapot in Villa Savoye's kitchen; and two mugs, an electric fan, and a single, raw fish, sinewy and sensual on a square-tiled countertop, in a kitchen scene from 1927 at Villa Garches, empty other than this frontal tableau and a handful of other kitchen items that recede into the background.[13]

Continuing these curiously empty styling conventions of early modernist architectural photography, O'Keeffe's ascetic sense for composing space with furniture and decorative objects is also largely consistent with other minimalist interiors in the US that would emerge in tandem with and in the wake of Abiquiú's mediatisation in the 1960s. New York is particularly rich with prime examples of this sensibility, such as in the residence of artist Donald Judd (1968), Alan Buschbaum's loft for scholar Rosalind Krauss (1976), and Robert Patino's apartment for jewellery designer Elsa Peretti (1976).[14] The soft minimalist, like the minimalist, leaves ample space around their objects and affords special time and investment in arrangements whose scarcity of elements maximise the dilation of their auras of value and significance. A rather conservative, and often seemingly casual, approach to the furnishing of space in soft minimalism suggests that the effort required for creating more traditional decoration schemes has been spent elsewhere, perhaps in more noble or esoteric directions. But the idiosyncratic arrangements that often appear in soft minimalist space also suggest that the work of interior styling is itself an important task, one requiring discipline and focus. Further, the uncluttered spaces that house the soft minimalist suggest an enlightened figure who has achieved a profound mastery over the disorder of everyday life.

Paradoxes of controlled spontaneity and studied casualness strongly colour the soft minimalist approach to styling. In the display of fine artifacts like art, sculptures, or furnishings, we find decorative accents are often positioned in space in a seemingly

unstudied, un-precious manner: stacked, leaning, even placed near or on the floor. These are foreclosures of traditional modes of display that might see cups hidden behind cupboards or paintings in frames or, as in O'Keeffe's home, a prized collection of stones placed in a vitrine. This suggests a latent casualness that obscures the soft minimalist's fastidious attenuation to the aesthetics of their lives. From time to time, soft minimalism forecloses.

The soft minimalist thus emerges as a person of special intention and credibility, one whose project we may not be able to fully grasp, yet whose virtue and aesthetic value is without question. After all, how can a shelf be *just* an ordinary mechanism for storage when its contents have been whittled down to only a handful of rarified, potentially useless objects?

To really feel the fullness — or emptiness — of minimalist phenomena, it is not enough to simply see what lies before our eyes. We must also become aware of minimalism's negative image — all that has been excluded from its tableaus. Such an awareness may rise beyond an ambient knowing into conscious thought, though feeling minimalism's full effects may require other means of perception than conscious knowledge. Any instance of minimalism is protected by an invisible border wall around its spatial frontiers, and its eros is fuelled, in part, by our ability to imagine, or to unconsciously know, the acts of gatekeeping and expulsion that happen at its protected margins and the force of pleasure that animates such gatekeeping. For every minimalist expression, there is a universe worth of consumer goods and objects that have been deemed un-castable actors for its play, non-conforming materials, objects, and compositions of space that have been — or theoretically could be — banished from its 'looks'. When we consider that a protective barrier encircles every instance of minimalism, and that such borders are home to acts of both profound and superficial curatorial discipline, minimalism becomes a paradoxical declaration of freedom. It is freedom *from* the detritus, disorder, and lowliness of the mass market and the mediocrity of 'average' social experience.[15] And it is freedom *to* craft the material world, and recast the inner self, in the same astringent image.

However, just as the movement of falling leaves or the swaying of a tree is necessary in order for us to 'see' wind, soft minimalism's aesthetic rigour is made more visible when placed in contrast with small moments that do not fall under its principles. As Corn notes, 'O'Keeffe enjoyed introducing little surprises into her otherwise monochromatic home decor, just as she relished little surprises in her clothes: buttons, stitching, or wearing a red coat with her black dresses.'[16] Aesthetic discrepancies allow for a sense of the individualism of the soft minimalist to emerge — a thinking, living, and breathing mind, with its 'own' tastes and idiosyncratic enjoyments, despite the soft minimalist's adherence to an aesthetic temperament shared by others of their class. The deviant is, in some sense, a proxy for the unruly inner self, a fingerprint of the spontaneous, childlike disorder that affects the image of artistic temperament that is so operationalised in individualist Western societies (one epitomised in the 'lazy, indulgent vacation feeling' and 'uninhibited and sensual materiality' of the jumbled interiors of another artistic titan of the twentieth century — Pablo Picasso).[17]

But the affordance of discrepancy engenders another outcome. Across each channel of soft minimalism's look, from colour to furniture to the arrangements of décor items in space, minor tensions and dissonance are rather fragile creations that require constant administration and investment. By allowing the discrepant into an otherwise clearly defined paradigm, the soft minimalist is obliged to distinguish between what dissonance or disorder in the soft minimalist formula is authentic — or flattering to a soft minimalist self-image — and thus subject to *preservation*, and what is not, and thus subject to elimination.

## sex and self-image

In O'Keeffe's desert home, we find not only an influential site for the production and distribution of what would become soft minimalism in America and the world over, but also evidence that suggests how this strand of minimalism is animated by a particular human longing that has seen proliferation in our own time. Beyond an anodyne system of décor, or a tool for soothing overstimulated modern minds, soft minimalism — as both an interior design aesthetics and as a genre of photographic images on the internet — represents a stranger psychic strategy. When we scratch beneath the sandy surfaces of its desert fantasia, we find a recurring human desire to reform our unruly inner worlds by upsetting the boundaries between our bodies and materials of our surroundings. But, distinct from earlier twentieth century styles of minimalism, part of the genesis of O'Keeffe's mature domestic aesthetic — and the key to its spread today — lies in an intergenerational wish that it may prove able to contend with the dehumanising force of hyper-mediation and the compunction to author a public self-image. O'Keeffe appears to have experienced something of this condition far earlier than we who live in the mirrored halls of universal micro-fame production today. Indeed, for O'Keeffe, the content of her public image was one of the key injuries of her life. And this injurious image may help us to understand why, well into her middle age, the artist allowed photojournalists to turn her private home into a photographic commons.

The source of O'Keeffe's injury lay, in part, with her husband, the American photographer and gallerist, Alfred Stieglitz. While Stieglitz was certainly a champion for the equal value of women's art, a vanguard especially for his time and his circle, in his frequent exhibitions of O'Keeffe's work, his writings and photographs of the artist rarely strayed from reductive narratives that divined maelstroms of liberated female sexual power inside the painterly abstraction of her images and within the woman herself.[18] Through his own statements, the essays he commissioned, and the photographs he exhibited of O'Keeffe in stages of undress, Stieglitz framed her paintings as expressions of a sexually emancipated woman and of powerful unconscious feminine forces, appealing both to the Freudian fervour of the early decades of the twentieth century and to the rather timeless titillations of sexual desire.[19] The oft-noted formal parallels between O'Keeffe's flower paintings and female genitalia constitute perhaps the most well-known trope about her work, followed perhaps by her synonymity with the American state of New Mexico.[20] For better or worse, this image of the artist and her work as somehow bound by an extraordinary libidinal energy would play a vital role in producing the wealth and remarkable prestige O'Keeffe enjoyed. It was, nonetheless, a narrative she would disavow her entire life.[21] However, it is unclear why she did not more forcefully condemn Stieglitz for this framing, one her closest confidant and most ardent supporter had a huge hand in producing. Perhaps it was a combination of love and fidelity, an unwillingness to challenge this public persona openly, or a calculated loss — the payoff of which she was willing to make.[22] As her biographer, Roxane Robinson, points out, in matters of Freudian analysis, every denial is an admission. Even if she had said something, would anyone have really believed her?[23]

But like many navigating a creative economy based in disintegrating bounds between our lives and our products, O'Keeffe yearned for a new image to live within — one truer to her nature as she knew it. Indeed, it seems that she never fully rejected the notion that an artist and her art may share some equivalence. After all, the dream that life and art might — and should — fuse is a recurring trope throughout cultural history, and the modernist reformation of which O'Keeffe was a part was particularly committed to the pursuit of this goal. But it was sex's role as the glue that bound person and artwork together that seems to have disturbed the artist. Regardless of her personal feelings on the matter of her celebrity, the truth remains that she did not lean away from the activity of building her persona, of translating her

personhood into thematically rich, concise images and vignettes that could represent her in the public imagination — and perhaps even to her own mind.

As a public figure, O'Keeffe was no stranger to the ecstatic, odd, and decentring experience of living at once as a body but also as a series of images orbiting beyond her skin. In fact, the artist was the subject of an uncommonly high number of photographs over the course of her life. While few of us today are strangers to the experience of being photographed, it is worth remembering that regularly sitting for photographs was still a nascent phenomenon back in 1918 when O'Keeffe began posing for Stieglitz's camera. Even decades after her first sittings, it is plausible that only a small number of people were subject to the camera's gaze with the same frequency as O'Keeffe, and it was an even smaller contingent of photographic subjects whose images were tethered to some platform for public consumption.

However, it was only after Stieglitz's death, and after her acquisition and subsequent renovation of her Abiquiú hacienda, that she finally had the means to counter the sexualised narratives constructed by the interpretations of her famous flower paintings. In this effort, O'Keeffe would turn not only to paint and canvas, but, most curiously, to interior architecture and its images.[24] It is in this deputisation of interior photography as a peculiar kind of tool — a technology with which she could construct new imaginations about her personhood — that we find an unexpected precedent for how images of interior environments operate in social media today.

The vernaculars of the Southwest O'Keeffe incorporated into her paintings, and the highly aestheticised, carefully constructed rooms she created for the camera's gaze at Abiquiú, added new dimensions to perceptions of her personhood and of her work. A steady stream of publicity would move from a trickle in the first decade of her residence to a fairly regular cadence over the following years, beginning with a September 1960 feature 'Women of American Art' in *Look* magazine, featuring photographs by Tony Vaccaro, of Abiquiú, her second New Mexican home at Ghost Ranch, and the nearby town of Taos.[25] In the 1960s alone, photographs of O'Keeffe and her distinctive soft minimalism would appear in *House Beautiful*'s 'The Austerity of the Desert Pervades Her Home and Her Work' in April 1963, *House and Garden*'s 'Five Famous Artists in Their Personal Backgrounds' in December 1965, *Atlantic Monthly*'s 'Georgia O'Keeffe' in April 1965, *Vogue*'s 'O'Keeffe: Her Extraordinary Contribution to Twentieth-Century Art ... Obscured by Her Fame' in March 1967, and *Life*'s 'Horizons of a Pioneer' in March 1968.[26] Laura Gilpin's article in *House Beautiful* is representative of the general tenor of description and analysis of O'Keeffe at this time, but also into the present. As one of the first publications documenting O'Keeffe's life at Abiquiú to feature photographs, the republication of the article on the *House Beautiful* website in March 2023 demonstrates both the lasting and renewed interest in the artist's architectural aesthetics in recent years. Consisting largely of a visual description of the home and its surroundings, sprinkled among these descriptions are what are by now familiar pronouncements about the emotional and tactical value of O'Keeffe's décor and minimalist styling.

> Most of life's petty frustrations are eliminated from Miss O'Keeffe's existence. She has reduced her life to fundamental essentials and those things that mean the most to her. The very objects with which she surrounds herself take on an added beauty by the way she arranges and places them. Such is the home, the life, the work of Georgia O'Keeffe, one of America's great painters.[27]

The O'Keeffe that emerged from these photographs and articles was not a sexual savant; instead, she was part cowgirl and part desert mystic, part Buddhist pilgrim and part high priestess of the American artistic avant-garde. In these publications, it would appear that O'Keeffe's

attempts to use architectural photography and interior design successfully redefined her public persona. But these victories would prove impermanent. Indeed, the 1960s, which saw the first substantial mainstream publicisation of her life and home in Abiquiú, would see sexualised readings of her paintings and person recede.[28] But by the following decade, the old O'Keeffe mythos would re-emerge at the hands of 1970s feminists, who upheld her work as a paragon of feminine sexual consciousness.[29] While the apparent necessity of a number of more recent feminist interventions into O'Keeffe's story — including a 2016 retrospective of the artist's paintings at the Tate — would suggest that O'Keeffe was unsuccessful in any subsequent attempts to neutralise her sexualised image, photographs of Abiquiú's interior spaces certainly built out additional scenery to the world that her sexual myth has come to inhabit across the later twentieth century and into the present.[30]

Beyond tethering O'Keeffe to a wider range of human archetypes that might recuperate her public persona, these images would also occasionally suggest something stranger. After her guests stepped out of Abiquiú's doors, walked across its gravel drive, and steered away along the ribbon of US Highway 84 that connected the world to the artist, they would edit, print, and publish images that would compress her into a new kind of woman — a construction of body, photograph, and domestic interior.

As Sparke contends in the thesis to her 2008 book, *The Modern Interior*, the domestic interior of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has always been embroiled in 'its simultaneous commitment to two, often opposing, sets of values denoting modern private domesticity and public life [... and] its familiarity with the ever-increasing demands of the mass media.'[31] Like the celebrity home tours that fill periodicals like *Architectural Digest*, the Abiquiú photo-archive collapses the line between public and private, as well as self and structure. While plenty of photographs show O'Keeffe in the frame, it is when she exits the frame that the most curious and influential transfiguration takes place. These figure-less images create a quasi-equivalence between O'Keeffe and her desert vistas, her home, and the various decorative vignettes that compose its interiors. In these images, her space becomes endowed with human qualities and virtues, which in turn lend her the qualities of objecthood and the decorative motif. This mirroring effect is the most consequential legacy of the Abiquiú home. Its photographs have eroticised a way of imaginative occupation where the distinction between inhabitant and habitation is made tantalisingly fragile. It is a promiscuity of embodiment, which scholar Anne Anlin Cheng has described as 'experiencing the porousness between persons and things, the alluring satisfaction of ontological shallowness.'[32] In the decorative paradigm of soft minimalism, we find this porous, hybrid figure has been lent a particular ascetic flavour.

Of course, O'Keeffe lived in a different media era to the digital one we know today. In some respects, her personhood was challenged and transformed in ways that were not significantly different to those of aristocratic figures of the early nineteenth century, for instance, who were subject to constant depiction in paintings, coinage, and monuments. However, it is perhaps the shift from O'Keeffe's time to the contemporary era of mass photographic mediation that explains the movement of her domestic aesthetics from margin to mainstream. In other words, it may only be with the introduction of digital images and the totalising media sphere they have created that the sensorial, psychic, and techno-psychic conditions were implemented at scale that make her aesthetics deeply desirable in our time.

Today, digital images of architecture invite other forms of engagement than our imaginative inhabitation. They are covetable, collectible objects that may adorn our online personas through acts of digital gleaning. Collected on design research platforms such as Pinterest, Are.na, or Instagram,

they become either points of reference for possible constructions or scaffolds for one's performative identity.[33] In a sense, all images organised within the defined bounds of a given user or company's digital presence functionally become 'selfies' — even without the 'self' being literally imaged. This kind of multimedia personhood built from architectural imagery and location-based data is one manifestation of the 'spatial self.'[34] Raz Schwartz and Germaine Halegoua deploy this term to describe productions of selfhood, '(both online and offline) where individuals document, archive, and display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others.'[35]

As it once was for O'Keeffe, for social media aesthetes today, interior architectural photography is a key material in which an extended, ambiguously private/public self is built out, rhizomatically, from the source subject across flesh and image. And depending upon the collection of formal and narrative qualities of the architectural images themselves, such photographs also function as carriers of a range of imagined values and, further, act as prompts that inspire shifts in our own self-image.

The magic of Abiquiú and its aesthetics lie in the ways in which, through the home's transformation into media artifacts, O'Keeffe forged a fantastic morphological continuity between herself and photographic space, and between herself and the varied meanings and imaginations the materials of the soft minimalist vernacular encode. Soft minimalism's real operating theatre may at times be our homes, prompting us to redecorate or rebuild, but its main target is our self-image. In adopting its aesthetics, we seek to become as crisp and quiet as a white coverlet pulled taut across a bed bathed in desert sun, and silent and still as an empty, wind-worn rock garden. These digital images today encrypt our own dream to become skeletal, sun-worn, and slight, a figure composed of flesh, pixels, and adobe walls. Such transformation fantasies offer imaginative channels through which contemporary subjects can both resist and concede to the cognitive conditions that suffuse digitally mediated life.

Soft minimalism both reflects and defends against a number of transformations that digital media has wrought upon the contemporary self. With its irregularity of surfaces, tactility, and vague historicity, O'Keeffe's 'soft minimalism' is today consumed as a somewhat ironic solution to a number of contemporary ills, from the fatigue of mass standardisation in America, the simulacra of digitally mediated life, and the estrangement of the embodied self from both its labour and its social bonds under global digital capitalism.[36]

For both O'Keeffe and for us today, the aesthetics of soft minimalism take the now pervasive capitalist imperative to externalise the self into a consumable, self-branded product, and transmute it into a more historically grounded, 'natural', and healthful posture. The collapse of self, image, and space that images of Abiquiú effortlessly produce — and that the digital marketplace of endless personal branding now demands and rewards — is recast as a noble act of self-mastery, one at an intersection between spiritually and corporeally purifying and thrillingly vertiginous. Put another way, soft minimalist spatial styling allows us to be of technological capitalism while still appearing to stand, sun-kissed on a desert ridge, just beyond it. Further, in its locationally and historically ambiguous 'timelessly past' aesthetic universe, soft minimalism also offers, as minimalist styling tends to do, an imagined escape from the endless agitations of novelty and fashion, a permanent, restful perch from which to perform our aesthetic identity without need for revision. As fashion scholar YeSeung Lee notes, 'both minimalist and anti-fashion stances pursue the absolute, the last word, the final judgement, which may be a "timeless" style or a total rejection of style.'[37]

The soft minimalist image is populated by materials, objects, and arrangements that come

from pre-digital times and often code for a range of attractive values at risk of endangerment in the digital age. Accordingly, as we adopt its aesthetic matrix of modern furnishings, antiques, folk crafts, building materials, and organic artifacts, we are surreptitiously endowed with their qualities of health, presence, and vague sacrality — in other words, the sense that we have rescued some part of our pre-digital selves. Soft minimalism's spread is fueled both by nostalgia for the value of objects and materials from our pasts (real and imagined) and, paradoxically, by their usefulness in constructing an aestheticised identity marketable to the social media sphere. In other words, the aesthetics of soft minimalism are, simultaneously, an imagined means of escaping our diminished and cognitively exhausted experience of contemporary reality *and* crude shorthands for performing an ennobled, humble, earth-bound self in the digital ether.[38]

Abiquiú's original synthesis of disparate references, and the home's transformation from a derelict hacienda to an abstract entity at the seam of architecture, image, and body, may have helped O'Keeffe to heal a wound unique to the artist's particular life of mediatisation. And while her relationship to mass media and to various capitalist imperatives to author her own creative mythology is a subject of historians' speculation, I offer that her camera-friendly aesthetics have been adopted today because they both shield us against mediation and depersonalisation, while also allowing us to play with these conditions. In this way, we discover a strange purpose for the 'double interior' — parallelism: 'as a space, as an image', and as a mechanism for imaginative self-reformation.[39]

## acknowledgements

My sincerest appreciation extends to the organisers of the Interior Educators 2025 conference, where I presented a shorter version of this research. I am also indebted to Michael J. Lewis, whose course on modernist architecture originally prompted this research and whose endorsement facilitated its first public presentation in 2022.

## biography

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