PANORAMA
Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art
ISSN: 2471-6839

Cite this article: Tara Kohn, "On White Surfaces: Beauford Delaney and Georgia O'Keeffe at An American Place," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2025), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.20481.

On White Surfaces: Beauford Delaney and Georgia O'Keeffe at An American Place

Tara Kohn

"Georgia O'Keeffe [1887–1986] spends much of her time nowadays down in New Mexico," writes the art critic Edward Alden Jewell in his review of her 1931 exhibition at An American Place, the last New York gallery overseen by his friend—and O'Keeffe's husband—Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946). Narrowing in on what he considered a particularly significant image, Jewell goes on to describe his encounter with *Horse's Skull with Pink Rose* (1931; fig. 1), a painting marked by complex layers of color that set this image apart, he suggests, from her other paintings of white flowers fading into pale animal bones displayed along the ash-tinted walls of the gallery. Deep blues at the edges of the frame spill into the center of the picture plane, transforming the white background from a flat expanse into an undulating surface; a shock of pink—petals of an artificial rose—emerges above the eye socket of the parched skull.[1]

Figs. 1, 2. Left: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Horse's Skull With Pink Rose*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, AC1994.159.1. Digital Image © 2025 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY; right: Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe—Exhibit at An American Place*, 1931–32. Gelatin silver print, 7 3/16 x 9 1/8 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Alfred Stieglitz Collection

Stieglitz framed the image at the left edge of an installation shot he snapped during the exhibition (fig. 2), flattening the vibrant tones of the canvas into gradations of black and white. In the photograph, the painting hangs on a stark gallery wall that blends at the edges and corners of the room into the pale gray of the stone floors and the shadowed

white of the ceiling.[2] In the black-and-white photo, the animal bone at the center of O'Keeffe's image hovers over a light background that pulls away from the edges and corners of the frame to reveal dark pools of paint; it appears, as one unnamed critic had written in response to the inaugural exhibition at Stieglitz's space one year earlier, to be "suspended in air rather than backed against a wall."[3]

In this essay, I explore the connection that O'Keeffe formed with the artist Beauford Delaney (1901–1979) within and around Stieglitz's gallery and through their engagement with two overlapping constructs of "place" that resonated within its light-filled rooms. The first is the gallery itself as a shelter for discussion, as a "phenomenon, an event, an environment," in Jewell's words, "in which the creativeness of the spirit became articulate in a sense that might be shared."[4] The second is the small expanses of space, extending outside these white walls in different directions and distances, that the artists who gathered there worked to know deeply, observe carefully, and translate into visual form.[5] I suggest that these two artists, connected through coinciding but very different struggles to navigate the systems of cultural marginalization and essentialism that seeped into the space of Stieglitz's gallery, explored and amended the aging photographer's intellectual ideals as a strategy of shaping a *place* for themselves at An American Place.

Perched on the seventeenth floor of a Madison Avenue office building, An American Place was more than a stripped-down architectural structure, a bare and shimmering space. It was *the* place for the cultivation of intellectual ideals, defined, as the writer and photographer Dorothy Norman suggests, not by its physical boundaries, but rather by the "aliveness of what might happen there."[6] "The walls in the different rooms are painted from varying pale luminous grays to white, which reflect the light coming in through large windows," as she puts it, describing the way beams of sunlight filtered in from the large expanses of glass facing the street. "With the white ceilings and bare, uncovered light gray painted stone floors," she continues, "there pervades in the space a clear and subtly fluid ever varying glow of light"—a light, for her and the other artists who gathered there, that symbolized the way that the space served as a center for artistic evolution and intellectual enlightenment.[7]

Delaney, who first visited An American Place in 1936, became a regular participant in lectures and conversations at the gallery, even as he continued to develop his connections to other queer artists and Harlem Renaissance thinkers. It was there that he nurtured his relationships with many of the cultural workers who gathered around Stieglitz, including Norman, the photographer Edward Steichen (1879–1973), the painters John Marin (1870–1953) and Arthur Dove (1880–1946), and, significantly, O'Keeffe, whom Delaney first met as a guest in the home of their mutual friend Mary Callery.[8] As he suggests in a letter from June 1944, Stieglitz not only welcomed Delaney into the hallowed halls of the gallery space but deeply valued his presence there. "I asked the question 'What is 291' many years ago," the photographer writes in broken lines that slant toward the bottom right of the page, beginning with the words "For Beauford Delaney." "I ask 'What is An American Place'" he continues, reframing the same inquiry he posed decades earlier when he was gathering essays and poems from his colleagues for a 1915 special issue of his journal *Camera Work*—a collection of writings that transform the space of his former gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue from a humble loft into a symbol for their most elevated ideals:

> There was war then—There
> is War to-day—
> There are as many and more
> promises to-day than then.
> Promises. What are
> promises—
> I am an old man to-day
> still serving—Yes
> serving.—Which?—I
> know—so does my
> friend Delaney. [9]

Reflecting, at the age of eighty, on the span of his life—on the waves of violence and cycles of history he had witnessed, often from the doorways and windows of the bare physical spaces he had formed and shaped into hubs of artistic dialogue—Stieglitz, in many ways, drew Delaney into the inner sanctum of An American Place. In writing this letter, Stieglitz extended an invitation that he reserved for close associates, for artists and writers with deep understandings of his vision as a gallerist. Delaney, in turn, suggests his own sense of belonging as he offered his insights into Stieglitz's last exhibition space: "An American place is white and gray," the painter writes, filled with artists and intellectuals who have "extended the dignity of the American spirit into the consciousness of our own times." Delaney, here, offers a gesture of reverence toward Stieglitz and the other frequenters of the gallery, "indomitable spirits," in his words, who met and shared ideas inside these walls—pale gray and clean, white surfaces that, significantly, never displayed Delaney's work.[10]

The underlying reasons for this exclusion were likely complex and overlapping. They involved, I suggest, Stieglitz's dedication to the artists he had represented for long spans of his career, his unexamined racial biases, and his interest in cementing his status as an American intellectual leader as he neared the end of his life. As Norman notes, Stieglitz believed that he had a responsibility to finish what he started—to give the artists in whom he believed a consistent platform that would allow them to evolve over the years to their fullest potential. He rarely took on new artists in the final years of his career, and the exhibition schedule at An American Place rotated almost exclusively among five painters he had already worked with for decades: Arthur Dove, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth (1883–1935), and Marsden Hartley (1877–1943).[11] By 1942, that list had narrowed even further to O'Keeffe, Marin, and Dove, artists who became, for Stieglitz, emblems of a homegrown American modernism, of an art that emerged out of "the American soil."[12] Stieglitz, a second-generation German-Jewish immigrant, reserved the white surfaces of his gallery for this small circle of white artists as a way of codifying his own claim to nation: "Georgia . . . *is* American," as he wrote to his friend Paul Rosenfeld in 1923. "So is Marin. So am I."[13] The gallerist, who existed, throughout his life, suspended between cultures and in an ambiguous, unstable racial category himself, was invested in shaping his exhibition space not only into a *place* but into an *American* place. His exclusionary exhibition programming was, in part, a tactic of veiling his immigrant roots and sealing his legacy among the cultural elite.[14]

In his efforts to downplay his own cultural difference, Stieglitz embraced Delaney with ambivalence—both accepting the painter as a respected colleague and refusing to display his work in the gallery. Delaney, in response to his unfulfilled longing to see his paintings hanging on Stieglitz's white walls, converted his one-room apartment and workspace into an off-site replica of An American Place; it became a kind of auxiliary exhibition space that showed only his canvases, a sanctuary for intellectual conversation with his friends and colleagues—his own *place*. He moved into his loft at 181 Greene Street in Greenwich Village the winter before his first visit to An American Place, and as a means of approximating the gradations of light gray that defined the physical structure of Stieglitz's austere space, Delaney draped white sheets over his furniture and cover his cracked walls with drawing paper.[15] The painter Paul Jenkins (1923–2012), recalling his 1952 visit to Delaney's home, describes the dark stairway that led him up to the second-story room. "When I walked into the place I knew I was somewhere," he writes, noting the ways that the quiet room, elevated above the Remsen Trucking Corporation, seemed far away from the noisy street below: "Delaney talked along and kept walking around, something in himself always in motion. His hands would touch things as he walked past them—chairs covered with sheets, their vintage and value hidden by the cool white."[16]

Fig. 3. Beauford Delaney in his 181 Greene Street studio, New York, NY, c. 1944; Courtesy of the Estate of Beauford Delaney, by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator, and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

In a 1944 photograph of this space (fig. 3), Delaney leans against a wall rippling with the undulations of the lightweight paper suspended behind him. He stretches his legs across a draped seat—perhaps doubling as his bed—and his fingertips cradle the edges of a record. The surface of his drafting table, also white, extends over the ledge of his perch and into the bottom right corner of the frame, and wires dangle precariously from the light fixture suspended from his ceiling at the center of the room. His paintings are installed salon style across the wall behind him, stacked and piled in the corners of the space, balanced against the edges of his furniture. His image *Dark Rapture*—a nude portrait of his close friend James Baldwin, who was a regular visitor to this space—hangs above Delaney's head. In the painting, a wide black mark extends down the surface of the canvas from the figure's left ear to his clavicle, accentuating the writer's broad shoulders and graceful, attenuated neck. Thick patches of paint build up Baldwin's muscular legs, one folded underneath the other at an angle that echoes the contours of Delaney's bent elbows in the photograph. The curve of his spine, leaning into the support of the wall behind him, contrasts with Baldwin's upright torso suspended on the white wall above.

Henry Miller, who reflects on his visit to Delaney's apartment in a 1947 essay, remembers shivering in this white-covered studio in the early days of autumn, as the painter, wearing

Fig. 4. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Untitled (Beauford Delaney)*, 1943. Charcoal with stumping and erasing on paper, 24 3/4 x 18 5/8 in. The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY; © 2025 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

layers of sweaters with a wool hat tucked around his ears, showed off his canvases. There was only a small potbellied stove to cut the chill, and when it went out, Delaney's studio became "icy cold, the dead cold of cold storage in which cadavers are preserved in the morgue."[17] O'Keeffe, too, commented on the biting cold that coursed through her veins when she visited Delaney at his Greene Street apartment.[18] Indeed, she decided to draw a series of pastel and charcoal portraits of him, at least in part, as an offer of financial support; he "posed for others," she noted in her reflection on this project, "because he had no heat in his studio and needed to keep warm."[19] In one image from this series from 1944, O'Keeffe blends the contours and shadows of Delaney's face, shaping a series of lines along his hairline, ears, jaw, and throat that sharply divide his dark features from the surface of the paper (fig. 4). The image of Delaney seems to hover over the background, as if O'Keeffe, in arranging the composition on the surface of the page, was placing the portrait along a wall in Stieglitz's gallery—or alluding, as the art historian Sarah Greenough argues, to the wooden carvings that Stieglitz installed at 291 Fifth Avenue during the 1914 exhibition *Statuary in Wood by African Savages—The Root of Modern Art*. Greenough, in her description of the rigid, frontal layout of the portrait—the dark marks around Delaney's lips and eyes that divide the black charcoal from the white paper—suggests that O'Keeffe may have been responding visually not only to the details of Delaney's features but also to the sculptures and masks that Stieglitz installed in his first gallery and kept in his collections.[20] Indeed, the precise edges of his face, displayed on the page like a kind of object suspended over a white void, evoke the sharp contours of the Baulé object that O'Keeffe represented in her 1923 work *Mask with Golden Apple* (fig. 5). In the painting, installed on the walls of An American Place as part of a 1935 exhibition, the sculpture emerges in horizontal profile across the canvas—suspended in what the scholar Charles Eldredge aptly describes as "the ambiguous space of the white ground"—behind the fleshy, shimmering surface of a piece of fruit.[21]

Fig. 5. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Mask with Golden Apple*, 1923, oil on canvas, 9 × 16 in. Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas. Photography by Dwight Primiano

Although O'Keeffe, in her portrait, problematically rendered Delaney's features in conversation with her studies of the formal qualities of African statuary, she also reveals in the image a deep connection she formed with the painter, her sensitivity to what she described as his "dark—clean—really beautiful" visage. It is in the details of her drawing, in the way she shades the gentle curves of his cheeks; his expressive eyes, slightly asymmetrical and sloping gently downward at the edges; the subtle wrinkles in his forehead; and the slight upward turn of his pursed mouth that she expresses her understanding of Delaney as "a very special sort of person"—a person who, like her, struggled to navigate a precarious position in the deeply stratified art world and complex contours of the social realm.[22] The forms of marginalization they worked to negotiate were never the same; doors opened for her that remained closed to him. Whereas he was never able to see his own paintings displayed along the white walls of An American Place, her work consistently filled the rooms. As she brought new paintings back from New Mexico to install at her husband's gallery, however, O'Keeffe was engaging in a strategy—one of many that she developed over the course of her career—to distance herself from critical paradigms centered on her femininity. She was attempting to transform herself from what Stieglitz famously described as a "woman on paper" into a painter of the high desert region.[23] Central to this process, as Wanda Corn argues, was O'Keeffe's relationship with the concept of "place," a term that took on sacrosanct layers of meaning for the circle of artists who gathered in Stieglitz's last gallery and connoted a practice of rooting themselves in small sections of land and specific geographic locales.

Inspired by these discussions as they unfolded at An American Place, O'Keeffe was spending increasingly long stretches of time in and around Abiquiú, making work that expressed a sustained and intimate connection with the arid topographies and sun-bleached animal bones of New Mexico.[24] She even evoked the language of "place" directly in the title of a series of paintings from this time, describing a region of the Bisti Badlands—where sandstone, shale, mudstone, coal, and hardened volcanic ash formed dark gray hills, punctuated with layers of color that seem almost alien—as "The Black Place."[25] It became, for her, a remote, isolated piece of earth that she returned to again and again to engage with emotionally and spiritually, to explore on canvas; she created fifteen images of this site between 1936 and 1949. The paintings she made in New Mexico, as Corn notes, effectively disarmed critics, who struggled to reconcile her images of hard-edged rock formations and desert skulls with their expected expressions of a soft and fleshy feminine sensuality.[26] In his review of her 1931 exhibition at Stieglitz's gallery, for example, Jewell uses a very different kind of language in his response to these works—"handsome pieces of painting" that reveal not her instinctive, emotional qualities as a woman but rather her "tireless ingenuity" as an artist.[27]

As O'Keeffe was reshaping the critical parameters of her work by displaying images of New Mexico—*her* place—at the gallery, Delaney was carving a space for himself within the Stieglitz circle through his own deep engagement with the discussions unfolding within those walls. Against the white sheets of paper in the ancillary exhibition space that he shaped in his small apartment, he displayed the paintings he made of the sprawling Greenwich Village streets outside his window—the narrow stretch of land that he knew most intimately. These images, as Miller recalls in his reflections on his visit to Delaney's studio, were "virulent, explosive paintings devoid of human figures." They were "Greene Street through and through, only invested with color," he goes on to note, "full of

remembrances too, and solitudes."[28] In the 1948 image *Washington Square*, for example, Delaney outlines a grove of skeletal trees in white outlines (fig. 6).[29] Their ocher branches fade into black in the background, and the top edge of the painting is built up of layered patches of orange and brown paint that shift into a stretch of blue sky. A trunk at the left edge of the image intersects, along a curving white border, with a black lamppost that extends down vertically toward the bottom of the image. Its yellow bulb, bordered in concentric circles of orange and white, illuminates the white expanse of the foreground in textured planes of gold and green. At the center of the painting, and up toward the top, another electric light casts a yellow beam down the canvas. This lamp seems to dangle from the branches extending above, as if it is suspended over the tactile layers of white paint below, recalling both the bone that hovers over the undulating surface of O'Keeffe's *Horse's Skull with Pink Rose* (see fig. 1) and the way that images appeared to float off the white walls and into the light-filled rooms of An American Place.

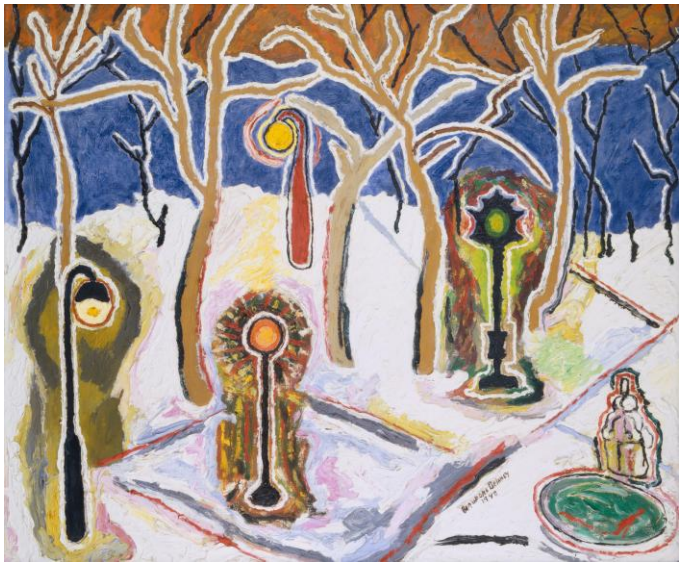

Fig. 6. Beauford Delaney, *Washington Square*, 1948, oil on canvas, 25 × 30 inches / 63.5 x 76.2 cm, signed; Private Collection; © Estate of Beauford Delaney, by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

In a letter to O'Keeffe dated October 1952, Delaney describes the single window in his new apartment, covered with a pane of opaque glass that blocked the sunlight from filtering into the dark room covered in white sheets. "Recently I have moved from Greene Street to Broadway where I have a loft with windows for the first time in 16 years," he writes to O'Keeffe, a friend who had become a "symbol" for him of "a way of life and creative realization"—a fellow explorer of the concept of "place" as a strategy for negotiating social and intellectual hierarchies. "Nevertheless," he adds, looking back on the years he spent in Greenwich Village, "I learned to see and feel in other ways."[30] He learned how to reshape his home into a *place*—to transform his bare, cramped studio into a center for intellectual dialogue and artistic debate. He draped his studio in white sheets and pieces of drawing paper to honor—and to protest—the light-filled, white-and-gray rooms of An American Place, a space that embraced him and nurtured his painting practice in some ways but that marginalized and excluded him in others.[31] In his Greene Street studio, he created and

cultivated a small wedge of earth that was, more than anything, *his*: a place pulsing with constant visitors, alive with possibility, and vibrant with the thick, textured, swirling colors he used to deepen his connection to the surrounding Greenwich Village streets.

Tara Kohn is a visiting assistant professor of art history at Berea College in Kentucky.

Notes

[1] Edward Alden Jewell, "Georgia O'Keeffe Shows New Work," *New York Times*, December 29, 1931, 28.

[2] Jewell, "Georgia O'Keeffe Shows New Work," 28; and "Marin Show Opens New Gallery," *Art News* 28, no. 14 (1930): 7.

[3] "Marin Show Opens New Gallery," 7.

[4] Quoted in Aline B. Louchheim, "An American Place Closes Its Doors," Art, *New York Times*, November 26, 1950, 268.

[5] I draw here on Wanda Corn's discussion of "place" as a concept within the Stieglitz circle; see Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (University of California Press, 1999), 239–92.

[6] Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (Random House, 1973), 193. It is important to note that in her description of the gallery, Norman, who was romantically entangled with Stieglitz in the later years of his life, was intimately invested in solidifying his legacy as a leader of American Modernism. Significantly, as part of this project, she draws upon language that reflects long-standing rhetorical strategies of uplifting his artistic spaces as prominent hubs in the shaping of intellectual discourse. The writer and critic Paul Rosenfeld, for example, similarly describes Stieglitz's first New York gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue (1905–17) as an architecturally humble, yet symbolically significant place where "the spirit of life came alive"; Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (University of Illinois Press, 1961), 257.

[7] Dorothy Norman, "An American Place," in *America & Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait*, ed. Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Dorothy Norman, Paul Rosenfeld, and Harold Rugg (Aperture, 1979), 67.

[8] David Leeming, *Amazing Grace: A Life of Beauford Delaney* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 63; and Ann E. Gibson, "Gay and Black in Greenwich Village: Beauford Delaney's Idylls of Integration," in *Beauford Delaney: From New York to Paris* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts and University of Washington Press, 2004), 18.

[9] Alfred Stieglitz to Beauford Delaney, June 2, 1944, private collection. I explore this special issue of *Camera Work* at greater length in my essay "Elevated: Along the Fringes of 291 Fifth Avenue," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1657.

[10] Quoted in Leeming, *Amazing Grace*, 77.

[11] See Dorothy Norman's essay "The Spirit of An American Place," in *An American Place*, ed. Ronald G. Pisano (Parrish Art Museum, 1981); and Ronald G. Pisano, introduction to *An American Place*, ed. Pisano.

[12] Sarah Greenough, *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries* (National Gallery of Art and Bullfinch Press, 2000), 457.

[13] Quoted in Greenough, *Modern Art and America*, 457.

[14] I engage more fully with Stieglitz's precarious place as both an American intellectual leader and a second-generation German-Jewish immigrant in my article "An Eternal Flame: Alfred Stieglitz on New York's Lower East Side," *American Art* 30, no. 3 (2016): 112–29.

[15] Gibson, "Gay and Black in Greenwich Village," 13; Leeming, *Amazing Grace*, 53; Richard A. Long, *Beauford Delaney: A Retrospective* (Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978), n.p.; and Richard J. Powell, *Beauford Delaney: The Color Yellow* (High Museum of Art, 2002), 14.

[16] Paul Jenkins, "Beauford Delaney: A Quiet Legend," *Art International* 6, no. 10 (1962): 31; Leeming, *Amazing Grace*, 53, 104.

[17] Henry Miller, "The Amazing and Invariable Beauford Delaney," in *Remember to Remember* (New Directions, 1947), 16–18.

[18] O'Keeffe, Jenkins, Baldwin, and Miller represented only four members of the long list of esteemed artists and intellectuals who had conversations with Delaney about the work he installed in his Greene Street studio. Visitors to the space also included the Harlem Renaissance leader Alain Locke, the artist Stuart Davis, and Stieglitz himself. See Leeming, *Amazing Grace*, 104.

[19] Quoted in Sarah Greenough, "O'Keeffe," in *Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection*, ed. Bruce Robertson (National Gallery of Art , 2000), 199.

[20] Greenough, "O'Keeffe," 199.

[21] Charles C. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe: American and Modern* (Yale University Press, 1993), 61.

[22] Quoted in Greenough, "O'Keeffe," 201.

[23] See Kathleen Pyne, *Modernism and the Feminine Voice: O'Keeffe and the Women of the Stieglitz Circle* (University of California Press, 2008), 177, 183. For other significant texts that explore the complex ways O'Keeffe responded to critical and public perceptions of her work, see, for example, Greenough, *Modern Art and America*; and Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz, and the Critics, 1916–1929* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[24] Corn, *Great American Thing*, 248–49.

[25] Sascha T. Scott, "Georgia O'Keeffe's 'Black Place,'" *Art Bulletin* 101, no. 3 (2019): 93.

[26] Corn, *Great American Thing*, 248, 270.

[27] Jewell, "Georgia O'Keeffe Shows New Work," 28.

[28] Miller, "Amazing and Invariable Beauford Delaney," 18.

[29] As Ann Gibson points out, Delaney may have returned to Washington Square Park so often to paint in part because it was an area that remained tolerant of racial and sexual difference even as the neighborhood's reputation as a center of bohemian and subversive lifestyles began to fade. See Gibson, "Gay and Black in Greenwich Village," 20, 26.

[30] Delaney to O'Keeffe, October 1952, Delaney, Beauford, 1950–1954, Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation Correspondence Photocopies, 1.1, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, accessed September 28, 2022, http://archive.okeeffemuseum.org/repositories/2/archival_objects/308.

[31] Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz*, 76.