

## INTRO)

The focus of my essay is to discuss the composition of each piece portraying natural forms, and how they may convey deeper meanings. I will also discuss different interpretations of the pieces, such as Georgia O' Keeffes, 'Flower of Life 2,' analysed by critics who argued it is symbolic of female genitalia. I will also discuss Imogen Cunningham's, 'Magnolia Blossom', which critics say is representative of Cunninghams thoughts on fertility and reproduction at the time. Contrastingly, Karl Blossfeldt's 'Acanthus Mollis' does not parallel human anatomy, however has 'architectural qualities, conveying man-made design.

### Magnolia Blossom – Imogen Cunningham

'Magnolia Blossom' by Imogen Cunningham fills the frame and is a close composition, tilted forward as if Cunningham tried to 'present' the flower. Despite the overall shape of the flower photographed, the monochromatic sharpness of the photo makes us focus on the flower's individual details without the distraction of colour, such as the shadows and shapes on the stamen, and the folds and curves of the petals. Seattle Art Museum evaluates this point, saying that Cunningham 'makes the subject of this work not the plant as a whole, but rather the innermost folds and stamen of the blooming magnolia flower,' allowing viewers to focus on the intricate details of the flower. Furthermore, Cunningham's granddaughter, Meg Partridge, said that this piece is a 'beautifully sharp, focused, large-format image that is a simple subject, but it's very powerful.' There is natural light behind the petals, highlighting the translucence of the petals which highlights the stamen and pistil. Which further conveys a sense of strength and power through the skilful accentuation of the dominant features.

Cunningham's photographs also explore the anatomy of her subjects, revealing "life within the obvious external form". In this piece, there is a juxtaposition between the hard and soft parts of the flower, the petals have a softness, making the stamen and pistil stand out, provoking symbolism on sexual anatomy, and eroticism. Despite its sensuous qualities, the flower can be metaphorical for many things. The isolation of the stem may suggest Cunningham isolation, and 'The Art Story' suggests this piece has symbolism of fertility and vitality, saying 'Magnolia Blossom' reflects her 'contemplation on her own fertility and reproductive capacity at this time.'

It is unknown the specific camera she used, however, she chose a lens with a large depth of field to allow most of the picture to manifest in sharp detail. Most of the work was done inside of the camera, reflective of Ansel Adams' techniques and beliefs, who was a believer of keeping true to this process, and helped found the f/64 group. This photograph is also a 'gelatin silver print,' defined as a black and white photograph made on paper coated with a light-sensitive emulsion of silver halides in gelatin.

The proximity evokes a sentiment of intimacy between the viewer and photograph, and due to the natural lighting Cunningham uses, she creates a dreamy, soothing atmosphere, perhaps because of the beauty of the natural world and natural forms. This

further evokes a sense of wonder in the viewers, as people cannot see flowers and natural forms to this detail with the naked eye.

Imogen Cunningham first began photographing magnolia blossoms in 1923, in her San Francisco backyard, while she looked after her children. During this period, American photography was experiencing change. In her 1925 photograph named 'Magnolia Blossom', Cunningham intentionally takes on a more American modernist approach, the proximity of her photograph conveying abstract ideas and sensuality. She was also part of the collective 'f/64', named after the smallest apt that captures the sharpness such as in 'magnolia blossom.' The process of using silver gelatin print was also the most common method for black and white photography since the 1880's and stayed the dominant process for a lot of the 1900's.

### Flower of Life 2, Georgia O' Keeffe

Like Cunningham, Georgia O' Keeffe depicts her painting 'Flower of Life' exaggerated and magnified, saying "I decided that if I could paint that flower in a huge scale, you could not ignore its beauty." This allows the viewers to see what they would normally miss in natural forms such as the innermost folds and shapes of the petals. In 'Flower of Life,' her paint application is smooth and precise, seamlessly combining gradations of colour, and O' Keeffe sometimes makes the stylistic decision to leave the brushstrokes visible, adding texture the surface. In this piece according to 'Artchive,' the subtleness of the textures and tonal variations, alongside the smooth transitions between the colours, give the flower 'a three-dimensional quality.' O'Keeffe works skilfully with light purples and dark maroons to create realistic portrayals of shadow and depth. Despite using high contrasting palette, dominated by vibrant hues of primarily purple, Keeffe accurately depicts a portrayal of realism through an abstract interpretation.

O' Keeffe's flower paintings were perceived as abstract observations of female genitalia, and according to fine arts museum of San Francisco 'They often are interpreted as deeply personal and autographical expression.' Like Imogen Cunningham, Georgia O'Keeffe depicted flowers and was drawn to the absolute epicentre of the bloom, and in this piece, she depicts the flower on a macro level, which critics have argued has a 'double meaning.' Regardless of different interpretations of this painting, it undoubtedly conveys the beauty of natural forms and evokes discussion on parallels between nature and humanity.

O'Keeffe used the wet-into-dry technique, allowing the earlier layer of oil paint to dry to prevent tones from blending. Before painting, O'Keeffe used pencil or charcoal to finely draw lines on her canvas, proven using 'photomacrography' and infrared reflectography. She also made her own backing boards that protected her paintings, using cardboard. O' Keeffe adopted many styles throughout her career, however 'Flower of Life' is defined as 'precisionism,' and according to Jessica Murphy, precisionists

'reduced their compositions to simple shapes and underlying geometrical structures, with clear outlines, minimal detail, and smooth handling of surfaces.'

Like Imogen Cunningham, O' Keeffe's work leads viewers to ponder upon the complexities of the natural world, and the 'Artchive' expands on this, saying this 'intimate study of a flower invites contemplative engagement.' 'Flower of Life provokes ideas of femininity and sexuality, and the colours she uses elevate this, emotionally affecting viewers. The paints are predominantly shades of purple, which has links to royalty and luxury. This may convey a sentiment of empowerment for the viewers, and given the interpretations of her flower paintings, may further evoke a sense of confidence and self-worth for her female viewers. Moreover, the colours in this painting are calming, the lighter shades of purple associating with tranquil and peace.

The symbol 'Flower of Life,' is a sacred, geometric symbol consisting of 19 overlapping circles, crossing over each other to form flowers. The symbol portrays ideas on the creation of the universe, and harmony, much like the harmony of the colours that work together in this painting, and the importance of natural forms in the world. During the 1920's, women were beginning to become more expressive on gender and sexuality, hence why many labelled her paintings as symbolisms of female genitalia. O' Keeffe's husband, Stieglitz, had presented his nude photos of her at his exhibition in 1921, which further amplified critics view that Georgia was sexual and interpreted her paintings as erotic. However, O' Keeffe said, 'you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower- and I don't.' rejecting such notions on her paintings. She did not label herself as a feminist but instead wanted to be recognised as an independent artist and individual.

### **Acanthus Mollis- Karl Blossfeldt**

'Acanthus Mollis' by Karl Blossfeldt' is photographed on a macro- scale, with a monochromatic sharpness. He depicts the tall narrow Acanthus Mollis with powerful contrast, clearly outlining the complex detail of the veins and layers of the leaves. Despite being using a "microphotographic" technique, Blossfeldt captures the overall symmetrical shape and layers of the plant, conveying its 'architectural' qualities.

Like O' Keeffe, Blossfeldt's images merges both scientific realism and artistic exploration, where he expressively conveys his philosophy. This photo is a realistic depiction of the Acanthus Mollis, where he captures the 'architecture' of the plant, mirroring the patterns in human design and art. Isabella Meyer states that he 'emphasises the artistic dimension inherent in natural forms.' Suggesting that natural life entails deeper meanings, as artists may express in their art.

The method Blossfeldt used, defined as 'microphotography,' meant he photographed his subjects extremely close. He constructed his own camera, made of wood, and had a metre long bellows. Due to the unique camera made by himself, he was able to take photographs unlike any other photographer was able to do at the time. Additionally, his

ability to zoom in so close to a plant's leaves and stem was also unlike any photographs of natural forms at the time. Like Imogen Cunningham, this piece is a 'gelatin silver print,' and Blossfeldt printed this piece using 'photogravure,' using light sensitive gelatin paper, trays of chloride chemicals and copper plates.

Due to this photograph being scientific, there are limited interpretations that may provoke emotion in the viewers, contrary to 'Magnolia Blossom' and 'Flower of Life,' often compared to human anatomy. However, the intricate detail and closeness of 'Acanthus Mollis' evokes a sense of awe in the viewers, inspiring them to think upon the complexities of the natural world, and the wonders of all natural forms such as the unique 'Acanthus Mollis.' Michael Hoppen said he presents everyday garden flowers 'in such a way that their rhythmic forms are emphasised to the extreme' which leads to 'the plants taking on new and exotic characteristics.' There is an elegance of the photograph due to the symmetrical patterns, and curves of the plant, making viewers think upon the perfection of nature.

Blossfeldt is best known for meticulously documenting the intricate structures and patterns of plants. His camera was able to photograph forms thirty times their natural size, and therefore his photographs were used as scientific teaching tools to show the connection between nature and art. He lived and worked in Berlin as a sculptor, teacher, and photographer, initially photographing natural forms as a teaching experiment to inspire his art students. In the late 1920's an influential gallery owner found his work, and his magnified images have been celebrated since. After publishing his book 'Unformen der Kunst' in 1928, which included his photograph 'Acanthus Mollis', (which translates to 'Art Forms in Nature'), Critic and Philosopher Walter Benjamin said his work revealed 'the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle.' And described his photographs as 'astonishing.'

## CONCLUSION

Overall, both Georgia O' Keeffe and Imogen Cunningham's works arguably portray human anatomy. Whilst O' Keeffe's painting has different interpretations, the scale of the painting, and folds of the petals leaves viewers to interpret it as symbolic of female sexuality, whilst also conveying the beauty of the natural world. However, Cunningham's photograph is clear in its meaning, the use of lighting, proximity and emphasis of the central part of the flower suggests its parallels with human anatomy, and deeper meanings of reproduction and new life. Karl Blossfeldt's scientific photograph has architectural qualities, which are emphasised by the layers of the plant, and the intricate details and use of contrast leads viewers to think about the wonders of nature, and how nature can attain the same architectural structures of man-made designs.

