

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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A guide to the vital work of American photographer Catherine Opie
From skin engraving to fetish photography and increasing LGBT visibility, Catherine Opie is a photographic visionary



"Self Portrait / Pervert", 1994 via [pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com)

Photographer Catherine Opie is a master of portraiture, but not for mastering traditional photography skills – for pushing them harder and further than many other photographers have done before. Beginning her career in the early 90s, Opie has shot everything from leather-clad lesbians in San Francisco's underground fetish scene, to butch play, drag kings and queens, famed artists like David Hockney, John Waters and Michele Lamy, and America's far-reaching political and environmental landscapes. On top of these images, Opie has produced an entire collection of intricate self-portraits that use boundary-pushing methods, like skin engraving, to explore her own identity as a queer, butch, American mother. Most recently, Opie collaborated with Balenciaga to produce a special project featuring musician Shamon Funchess and models Caroline Schechtner and Jenny Shimizu, styled by Lotta Volkova.

Across the multiple faces and themes Opie has shot, one overarching impact has been clear: Opie's work has been paramount to increasing visibility for America's queer communities.

In light of her Balenciaga collaboration, here's everything you need to know about Catherine Opie.

AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER LEWIS HINE WAS HER FIRST INFLUENCE

Lewis Hine was a photographer whose sepia portraits of child factory workers in the early 1900s titled *Faces of Lost Youth* were so influential, they changed child labour laws in America forever. Hine was Catherine Opie's first influence. After writing a book report on Hine at the age of nine, Opie asked her parents for her first camera and told them she was going to be a documentary photographer. Opie also states that her first self-portrait was taken at age 9. Taken in black and white, Opie reflects in an interview with the Kunsthistorisches Museum that "It's an endearing portrait. It's like a baby dyke portrait, I have my zipper half down on my flower pants, and I'm looking quite spiffy

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and strong with my bad haircut in front of my little house in Ohio.” It’s this image combined with Hine’s influence that would set Opie onto a lifetime of portraiture.



Portrait of Catherine Opie, aged 9. Screenshot from Catherine Opie in conversation with Jasper Sharp

HER FIRST SHOW DOCUMENTED LA’S 90S BUTCH SCENE



“Chicken”, 1991 Photography Catherine Opie
Via Pinterest

In 1991, Opie had her first show *Being and Having* which innovated classic studio portraiture because of its unique subject matter and photographic processes. The series features a set of 12 portraits that capture faces from Los Angeles 90s butch scene in exaggerated masculinity. Opie was heavily embedded in the community, which she reflects didn’t really have a place in the city at the time. For fun, Opie and her friends used to don fake moustaches and chaps, and ride around on motorbikes offering people rides around the city. “People thought we were crazy,” reflects Opie.

She decided to document this with a set of in-studio portraits taken in front of a yellow backdrop: a colour used to subvert traditional documentary processes and to explore the link between performance and gender. She shot the series on a large format 4x5 camera because she wanted viewers to be consumed by the detail of her subject’s skin, something she believes can tell an intricate story about the sitter. For example, in “Chicken”

(1991), featured below, we can trace everything on the subject’s face, from her freckles to her the tiny hairs that make up the arch in her eyebrows. The subjects’ gaze also overthrows traditional documentations of women. According to Opie, when we see women in photography, we are used to seeing a vacant stare. “It was unusual, even in 1989, to have this masculine approach to staring back at the camera.”

SHE REMADE ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE’S ‘X’ SERIES WITH PORTRAITS OF SAN FRANCISCO LEATHER DYKES

In the late 1970s, Robert Mapplethorpe published a series of portraits titled the *X Portfolio*, which photographed New York’s gay bondage scene. Some of the men wrapped head to toe in glistening PVC bodysuits assuming dominant and submissive positions, while others appeared beautifully nude. In the late 1980s, Catherine Opie responded to the *X Portfolio* by recreating it through her own identity: she replaced Mapplethorpe’s queer men with lesbians from San Francisco’s leather dyke community, where Opie was a member of a group called *The Outcasts*.

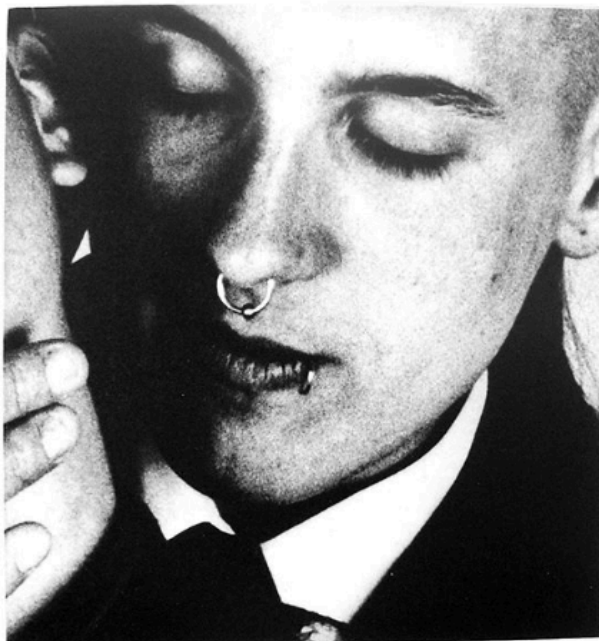
The *O Portfolio* deviates from the traditional straight-up clarity of her earliest works by picking up on the black and white Mapplethorpe aesthetic that drives Opie’s lens into abstraction, as it explores the tension between private desire

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and public display. While Opie shot these images in the 1980s, they didn't go on show until the 1990s. Opie attributes this to a widespread art censorship at the time that was targeting queer content, such as when Mapplethorpe's retrospective in Cincinnati was shut down. It wasn't until the Aids epidemic hit the creative community around her that Opie decided to be more direct and honest with the exposure of her work.



SHE ONCE STUCK 46 STEEL PINS INTO HER ARMS FOR A SELF PORTRAIT



"Self Portrait / Pervert", 1994 via
pinterest.com

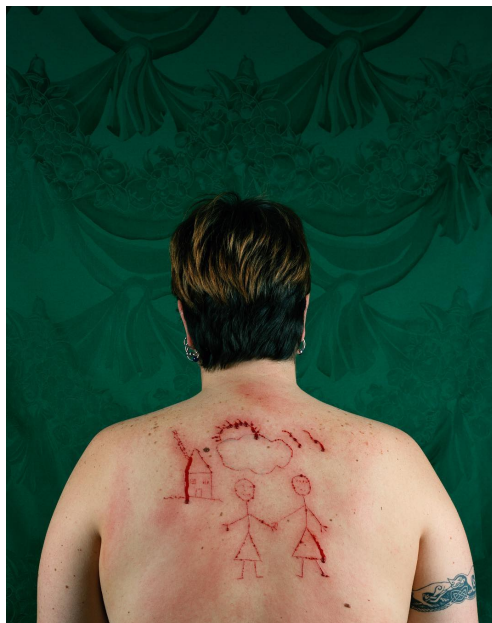
In 1994, Opie inverted her lens by taking a series of self-portraits so extreme, they are deemed as some of the most extreme works of art ever made. Pushing the possibilities of her body to powerful lengths in order to explore her own identity, "Self Portrait / Pervert" (1994) features Opie appearing like an executioner, sitting topless in a latex gimp mask with the word pervert carved into her chest in fancy typography. As her blood marks the edges of her carved chest, 46 neatly placed 18-gauge steel pins pierce her flesh on both arms. While Opie had used photography to explore her butch identity through others, now her lens was being used to tell the narrative of her involvement in local S&M communities.

The photo was taken at a time where she was concerned about the divide between the leather community and the wider gay and lesbian community; one she had witnessed at a Washington march earlier that year. At the march, the wider LGBT community had othered the leather community by protesting that non-leather communities 'were normal', which created a binary of 'abnormal' between the two groups. This is why Opie chose the word 'pervert' and engraved it on her skin. "That

was hard for me and that is what pushed me to make that piece," Opie told CNN. "It was like, 'OK I'm wearing the language that you're calling me on my body and I'm just going to sit here like Henry VIII in Hans Holbein's paintings and that's what you're going to have to deal with. Think about Holbein and you're going to have to think about this image!'"

SHE ENGRAVES HER SKIN AS A FORM OF ART

Just like in “Self Portrait / Pervert” (1994), Opie had also engraved her skin a year earlier in a work titled “Self-Portrait / Cutting,” 1993. This time, the engraving was used as a way for Opie to subvert traditional notions of domesticity. Standing stealthily in front of a forest green backdrop, Opie’s back oozes with freshly cut blood leaking from a deeply cut engraving that shows a child like drawing. The engraving is reminiscent of the drawings kids are asked to make at school of their families, but instead of showing a man and a woman side by side, Opie shows two women. There’s an intense duality at play in this work as the brutality of the blood creates a tension with the childhood optimism of the drawing further exacerbated by the peeping sun. Here, engraving her skin was critical to Opie’s art because it allowed her to embody new ideals of domesticity.



Continuing the subversion of traditional family structures is Opie’s 2004 portrait “Self/ Breastfeeding”, where she breastfeeds her then one year old son. With the scar of ‘pervert’ still lingering on her chest, Opie subverts traditional images of mother and child across art history, such as the typically canonised Madonna and child. She challenges these images as “an older lesbian who symbolises butch with the word pervert on (her) body”, Opie reflects in the panel with Jasper Sharp.

SHE’S AN AMAZING MENTOR



Alongside shifting her photographic focus to landscapes (political and environmental), and to taking portraits of celebrities like Michelle Lamy, Opie has been a professor of photography at UCLA since 2001, mentoring a whole new generation of young artists. And as she showed in an interview with Artsy last October, she gives incredible photography advice on how to take a portrait. Opie’s first tip is to photograph only if you have a question to answer. “The most important thing to do is to begin with an idea that tries to answer some questions,” Opie explained to Artsy. When it comes to portraiture, Opie’s biggest question is about representation. Another tip Opie shines a light on is the importance of shapes and how they can speak of a subject’s identity. “I always have different chairs,” she continued to explain her methods to Artsy. “Some portrait photographers have one chair, but I prefer different chairs because I want to have different shapes—shapes are really important to me.” A final searing tip from Opie is to treat all subjects with respect and to take responsibility for how they are being shown. “My line is no humiliation,” Opie states. “Anyone can feel exploited to an extent, even if they’ve given permission. It’s about having incredibly clear parameters in relationship to why you’re making bodies of work.”

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/41240/1/a-guide-to-catherine-opie-americas-most-extreme-photographer-balenciaga>