

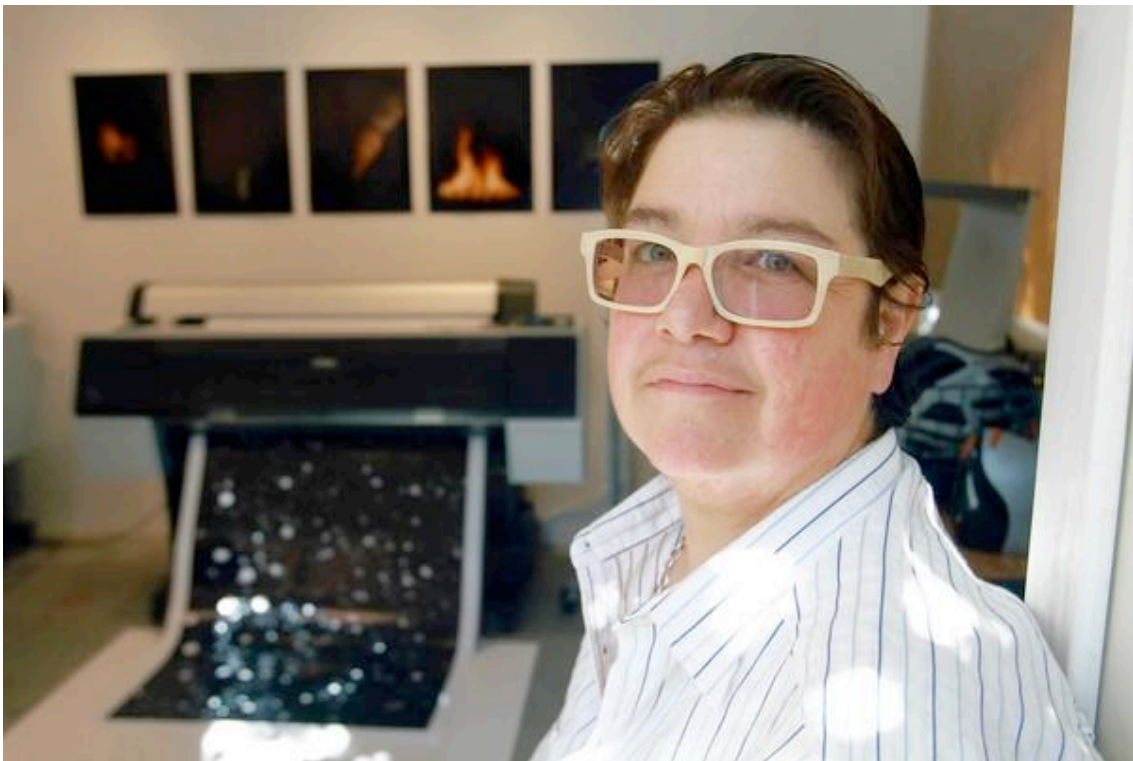
## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Appleford, Steve. 'Catherine Opie's Documentary Photography is on Display'. *Los Angeles Times*. 27 January 2013

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### Catherine Opie's documentary photography is on display

The artist has a new show starting at Regen Projects next month and has work up at the Long Beach Museum of Art.



Catherine Opie, artist-photographer. (Kirk McKoy, Los Angeles...)

The room is arranged like a gallery, hung with photographs of various sizes and shapes, framed and unframed, surrounding the artist Catherine Opie, who looks pleased as she observes from a rocking chair.

This studio built behind her house in West Adams is where so many moments from her art and life have unfolded. Back in 2004, she made a self-portrait here, topless and tattooed, nursing her young son, Oliver, against a vivid red curtain. Across her chest were scars left over from a much earlier picture, a one-word message carved into her skin and still faintly reading, "Pervert."

Now Oliver, 10, is seen in a recent photograph holding a pet mouse in a scene that quietly echoes the Leonardo da Vinci painting "Lady With an Ermine."

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"We only got four or five shots and the mouse bit him, and he walked off," says Opie, dressed in jeans and blue suede shoes. "Because I'm his mother, he knows my work so well. So he wants to perform what he thinks I want out of a portrait. It's very interesting, which is really different from anybody else."

The image of Oliver is from a new series of portraits from the Los Angeles photographer, all taken in this room. Nearby is an oval-shaped picture taken from over the shoulder of author Jonathan Franzen as he reads "War and Peace." There are others of swimmer and close friend Diana Nyad displaying a jellyfish sting and another of the gray-bearded conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner. There is a portrait of Pig Pen, one of Opie's most durable subjects since their youth in the San Francisco lesbian community, kissing a woman with blood dripping down their faces.

Opie's newest body of work represents what she calls a "huge departure" for the artist. The brooding photographs will be exhibited at Regen Projects in Los Angeles beginning Feb. 23. She has a show running at the Long Beach Museum of Art through March 24 and is editing photographs she took of Elizabeth Taylor's home and belongings shortly before and after the actress' death.

"I'm comfortable with departures," she says. This time it's in the approach, placing her subjects formally against a deep black backdrop, unlike the rich colors of her earlier portraits. They are often presented in shapes and poses that suggest an earlier time.

"It's the first time I've ever gone to a place of allegory. They are friends and people that I admire," says Opie, as long rolls of colorful seamless backdrops lean against the corner behind her. "I'm going to be 52 and things are shifting for me. I just wanted to make really formal portraits that were more about internal space versus reflecting an external politic. It really is about a place that I inhabit in my mind and body."

The new portraits are accompanied in the Regen Projects show by a series of abstract landscapes found in nature. Many of the locations are well-known wilderness areas and parks, but the pictures are intentionally unfocused and unidentified. They could be anywhere.

"Nature is a dream state at this point, that we almost don't have a real relationship to it unless it's people living off the land and killing our own food and going for it," she says. "Our relationship to it is often standing before it, taking out an iPhone, clicking it and then automatically putting it on our Facebook page to show everybody that we've been there. I'm asking people to go back to the sublime and to a place of beauty."

Opie remains a photography professor at the UCLA art department, and she is an occasional contributor to the New York Times Magazine. Her work first drew significant notice as she photographed the scene in the gay and lesbian community while an undergrad at the San Francisco Art Institute in the 1980s.

It was a community she never left, but her photography has gone on to explore other corners of life.

"I go back and forth, but I never wanted to be the photographer of the gay and lesbian community," Opie says. "I will wave a rainbow flag proudly, but I am not a singular identity. I think a singular identity isn't very interesting, and I'm a little bit more multifaceted as a person than that."

At a lecture this past week at the Hammer Museum, she planned to explore a shift in her work that began in 1999. Until then, her series of urban landscapes were often emptied of people, with elegant but austere pictures from Wall Street, of freeways and Los Angeles mini-malls.

She has since concentrated regularly on scenes of Americans engaged with their environment, gathered for the first Obama inauguration, at the Boy Scout Jamboree, at tea party and immigration rallies. "The reason I call myself a documentary photographer is the idea of how photographs contain and participate in history," she explains.

In 2008, the Guggenheim Museum in New York mounted a midcareer survey, representing 15 years of work. For the first time, it presented the large arc of her career in one place.

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"She became known initially for her portraiture and her self-portraiture and these beautiful landscapes. Somehow they seemed diverse bodies of work," says Jennifer Blessing, the museum's curator of photography, who organized the show. "But with the exhibition I became more aware of how she was weaving these things together.

"She is a political person. I like to say she is an ethical person. She is deeply committed to making the world a better place for herself, for her family, and in general," Blessing says. "That's a through-line you see in her early work and definitely to the present. It's who she is."

The Guggenheim show was not only a milestone in recognition for Opie but was a rare opportunity to study her own progression as spread across four floors in the museum. "It gave me a little bit of clarity in relationship to walking those floors and seeing things and figuring out OK, we've done this — where do I want to take things to?"

In another room of her studio, Epson printers slowly unfurl huge prints planned for the Regen show, part of a long, ongoing relationship with the gallery. In the past, Regen has shown her pictures of high school football players and surfers, and Opie's series of austere images of ice houses set on frozen lakes in Minnesota in 2001. One series that opened there, "Twelve Miles to the Horizon," of sunrises and sunsets in vertical landscapes, is at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

Another, far less happy departure for Opie came last summer, when she was one of four major artists to resign from the board of trustees at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art after the forced resignation of chief curator Paul Schimmel. Opie, John Baldessari, Barbara Kruger and Ed Ruscha left in protest not only because of Schimmel, Opie says, but because of other firings and sudden changes.

"The big one for me was not just John [Baldessari] stepping down first — that was a big red flag — but I had just given them a portfolio to sell to save a person's job in education," she says. "And it equaled about \$150,000, and literally the next day they let that person go.

"I can't imagine any board member writing a check for \$150,000 and having them turn around and let that person whose program you're supporting go. That to me was very insulting," she says.

She occasionally speaks with a few remaining board members. Opie says she and Kruger were vocal during their time there, but when changes began to occur, the artists felt left out of the conversation.

"I felt like, 'OK, I don't have a voice here,'" she says. "I don't want to be a figurehead. I actually want to participate in having real ideas and real feelings about what a place like MOCA means to this community."

One unexpected subject for Opie was actress Elizabeth Taylor. They shared an accountant, who suggested Opie consider a photograph of the movie star. Opie told him she didn't shoot celebrities but soon began having thoughts of Graceland and proposed making a portrait of the actress through pictures of her belongings and ranch house in Bel-Air.

The plan was for Opie to photograph Taylor's home and belongings in various degrees of detail, and she and Taylor would edit the images into a collection and a book. They did not plan to meet until the photographs were completed. "She watched me through the curtains, photographing," Opie remembers. "I don't think she would have allowed a portrait. She was not in great health, and she was very private."

Things became personal in surprising ways, as she found herself becoming part of the household, having lunch with Taylor's staff in the kitchen. That sense grew only stronger with Taylor's death in 2011, though the two had never met.

"I continued to photograph as the house began to be dismantled. It was really an unbelievable thing to witness how quickly somebody's life is figured out. I was there the day Christie's came to take the jewelry. I photographed Christie's packing up the jewelry to take to auction."

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She is editing that work. What Opie has shared reveals glimpses of Taylor's elegant clothing hung in closets and a ghostly, soft-focused image of La Peregrina, the pearl necklace husband Richard Burton bought for Taylor in 1969. "The body of work started out as a portrait and then it turned into a memorial," she says. "It's an odd thing, the idea of what photography does in that place where it contains history."

It was an experience similar to when she photographed the World Trade Center towers the same year they came down in 2001. "All of a sudden you have to go along with something that is a major shift in how something is read. That just comes with life. It's really an allegory of how we adapt."

<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/27/entertainment/la-et-cm-catherine-opie-20130127>