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Catherine Opie's Intimate Photographs of S&M



Image from Catherine Opie's 'O Portfolio' (1999) (all images courtesy LACMA)

LOS ANGELES — If you visited LA this summer, it would have been hard for you to ignore the presence of Robert Mapplethorpe. With a massive retrospective jointly organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Getty Center, he was in the air. On my visit to LACMA, however, I left the large exhibition behind to seek out the work of an artist who's often associated with Mapplethorpe, because of their commonality of photographing BDSM and queer communities: Catherine Opie. She also has an exhibition on view at LACMA, of her well-known *O Portfolio*, a series of photographs of S&M practices that started as a reaction of sorts to Mapplethorpe's controversial *X Portfolio* (1978).

The seven pieces in Opie's portfolio display a raw tenderness and explicit sexuality. While the work captures, in a way, San Francisco's bondage community at the time — the series was produced over the course of a year, with Opie

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inviting friends into her studio and constructing the images — its focus is less documentation and more an illumination of intimacy. The understated photographs are laced with delicacy, while at the same time broaching a subject that was then, and to some extent still is now, taboo. There's a romance to the work, a palpable beauty, as Opie gives the viewer a window onto a world they may never have experienced. The tightly composed photographs all zero in on their subjects — a thigh, a rope, streaks of blood — with an unflinching gaze, placing you, for a brief moment, in that world.

The gaze is tempered by the soft focus of the images, which creates a balance between the graphicness some associate with BDSM and the romance Opie wanted to convey. The black-and-white palette adds a feeling of timelessness. The portfolio was created in 1999 — a moment when the effects of the culture wars were being felt, AIDS was being formally recognized as a national threat, and the leather community was still viewed as radical. Opie's work served as a bridge from subculture to broader culture; she used a formal approach to image making as a means of humanizing what was viewed as a morally subversive subject.

It's not accidental that Opie's work was selected to be on display at the same time as Mapplethorpe's. The two weren't quite contemporaries, but, as evidenced by the genesis of the *OPortfolio*, they often entered into an artistic dialogue with one another (though Opie denies his direct influence). What was perplexing as a LACMA viewer was the distance between the two exhibitions. The scale of the shows is obviously different — retrospective vs seven small photographs — but the Opie exhibition is tucked far away from where the Mapplethorpe was, in what's basically a hallway leading to the Study Center for Photography and Works on Paper. In this last sense, its location is logical, but as a viewer, I felt a thematic disconnect. I wanted fluidity between the two artists, not such a separation.

Nevertheless, Opie's series holds its own power. The works are small but have a tidal effect, washing the viewer in the intimate beauty of an act that's meant for the privacy of lovers, now tenderly laid bare.

Catherine Opie: O continues at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (5905 Wilshire Blvd, Los Angeles) through October 2.



Image from Catherine Opie's 'O Portfolio' (1999)

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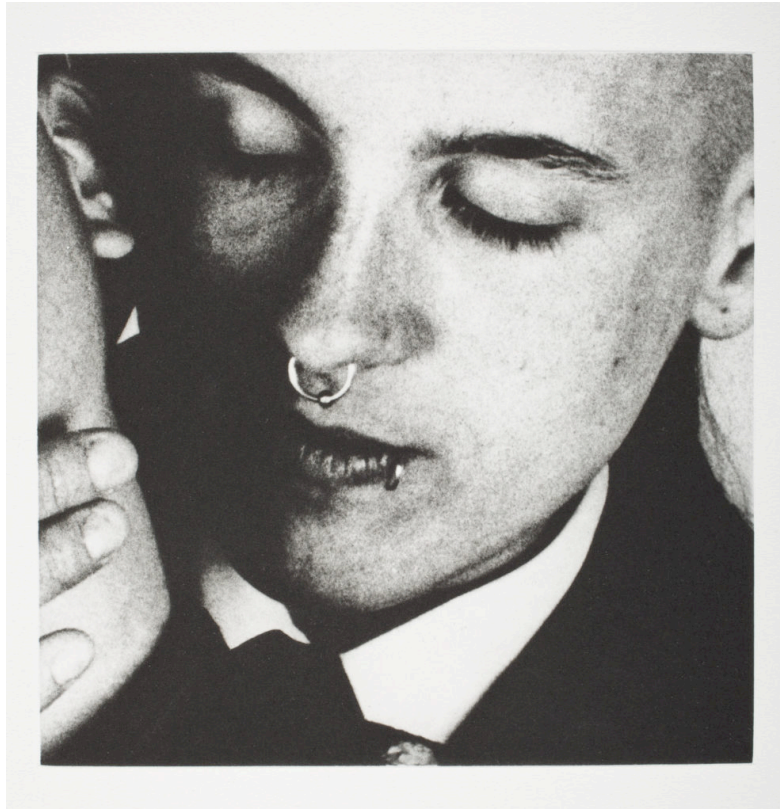


Image from Catherine Opie's 'O Portfolio' (1999)

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