

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Doran, Anne. 'Catherine Opie's American Souvenirs'. *Aperture* Online. 16 February 2016

aperture

Catherine Opie's American Souvenirs

From the rush of Niagara Falls to Elizabeth Taylor's bedroom, a chronicler of American life presents two concurrent exhibitions.



Catherine Opie, *Mary*, 2012 © Catherine Opie and courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

For the last thirty years, Ohio-born, Los Angeles-based photographer Catherine Opie has been making formally assured and psychologically astute images of America's landscape and people. Her subjects have ranged from the 1980s lesbian BDSM scene in San Francisco (of which she was once a part), surfers in Malibu, and high-school footballers in small towns across the U.S. to Los Angeles freeway overpasses, Minnesotan ice fishing houses, and downtown St. Louis at dawn. The notion of community with its attendant questions of identity and inclusion is a persistent theme in her work.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Catherine Opie, Untitled #9, 2013 © Catherine Opie and courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

For her solo debut at New York's Lehmann Maupin gallery, Opie presents two concurrent shows. Portraits and Landscapes at the gallery's Chelsea space combines allegorical photographs of Opie's friends and people she admires with oversized, out-of-focus images of mountains and waterfalls shot in national parks. At Lehmann Maupin's Lower East Side outpost, 700 Nimes Road, titled after the address of Elizabeth Taylor's former home in Bel Air, is a portrait of the actress through pictures of her house and her possessions. (Iterations of both exhibitions are currently on view in Los Angeles at the Hammer Museum and MOCA Pacific Design Center respectively.)

The portraits in Portraits and Landscapes, largely of people from the overlapping worlds of fine art, fashion, performance, and writing, consciously evoke Old Master paintings in style. Each subject poses against a black background, their strongly lit features swimming up out of darkness. Julie Tolentino and Stosh Fila (a.k.a. Pigpen) enact an S&M performance, Pigpen suturing Tolentino's mouth closed with needles and red silk ribbon, while Kate and Laura Mulleavy, of the fashion house Rodarte, present a tableau in which one, in a man's suit, works on an embroidery of a blood stain, as the other, dressed in white ruffles, looks on.

Viewed in conjunction with these former works, more straightforward portraits—of author and critic Hilton Als debonair in seersucker, artist Chuck Close flamboyant in a wildly patterned silk shirt, and endurance swimmer Diana Nyad muscular in nothing at all—cannily suggest that we are all, to some degree, and particularly in the age of personal branding and the Internet, performers. The blurred postcard vistas accompanying the portraits might also be seen as landscapes performing abstracted versions of themselves.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Catherine Opie, Hilton, 2013 © Catherine Opie and courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

But in spite of their undeniable beauty, these works, in their too-heavy black frames, are underwhelming. The portraits' lack of psychological complexity in favor of markers of profession or class—Nyad's tan lines; tattoo-parlor owner Indexa's body art—is mirrored in their painting-like flatness. Likewise, the landscapes, reduced to muddles of surface color, are revealing of nothing. In these works, at least, Opie elects to refute photography's rather closer relationship to sculpture, particularly its ability to record, rather than render the illusion of, real space.

More satisfying is 700 Nimes Road. While engaged in documenting Elizabeth Taylor's house, Opie never photographed or even encountered Taylor, who died three months into project. Thereafter the series took on a new dimension as Opie recorded the dismantling of Taylor's home and the readying of her belongings for sale. While this series, too, focuses on performativity—in this case Taylor's carefully maintained, ultra-feminine persona—it presents dichotomies at every level: between public and private, formality and hominess, perception and reality. There is humor here, too—a close-up of swagged pink curtains suggests the star's famously ample cleavage—and acknowledgement of a life lived almost entirely in the public eye, summed up by the numerous “intimate” snaps of Taylor and Richard Burton taken by professional photographers.

Equally important, perhaps, are the spatial qualities of the pictures. Billed as Opie's homage to William Eggleston's photographs of Graceland, they display, if not Eggleston's extraordinary sense of color and composition, a similar attentiveness to the relationship between objects in space. In images of hatboxes stacked on a lavender shag rug, gowns confined in boxes with see-through lids, and those legendary jewels sorted into Lucite containers—all in preparation for auction—Opie shows her true skills as a photographer.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Catherine Opie, *Bedside Table* from the 700 Nimes Road Portfolio, 2010–11 © Catherine Opie and courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Catherine Opie, Krupp Diamond from the 700 Nimes Road Portfolio, 2010–11 © Catherine Opie and courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Anne Doran is a visual artist and writer living in New York.

Catherine Opie: 700 Nimes Road is on view through February 20, 2016 at Lehmann Maupin, Lower East Side. Catherine Opie: Portraits and Landscapes is on view through March 5, 2016 at Lehmann Maupin, Chelsea.

<http://aperture.org/blog/catherine-opie-american-souvenirs/>