

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Muchnic, Suzanne. 'L.A. Story: Catherine Opie on Her Controversial Photographs of Los Angeles Subcultures, in 1998' *ArtNews* Online. 22 January 2016

ARTNEWS

L.A. Story: Catherine Opie on Her Controversial Photographs of Los Angeles Subcultures, in 1998



Catherine Opie, *The Shoe Closet* from the '700 Nimes Road Portfolio,' 2010–11, pigment print. ©Catherine Opie/Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles And Lehmann Maupin, New York And Hong Kong

In honor of her two shows at Lehmann Maupin and her show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles opening this weekend, below is a profile of Catherine Opie from the September 1998 issue of ARTnews. —The Editors

“L.A. Story”

By Suzanne Muchnic

From the leather crowd to mini-malls, Catherine Opie trains her lens on the subcultures of Los Angeles

Sitting down at a table in the reception area of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art as if she were in her own living room, Catherine Opie opens a big black box of photographs. Freshly scrubbed and casually dressed in jeans and a striped shirt, the 36-year-old artist is the picture of unpretentious confidence—an all too rare example of an artist who has been catapulted from obscurity into the limelight and knows how to handle it. As the first winner of the Los Angeles museum's Emerging Artist Award, Opie was recently honored with a show of her black-and-white

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photographs of freeways and mini-malls. The award also includes \$50,000 funded by Citibank Private Bank, of which a portion is given to the museum to acquire the artist's work. Today Opie and curator Elizabeth A. T. Smith are selecting six photographs to add to the museum's collection.

Without seeing the contents of the black box, one might think Opie is comfortable in the art world's lofty places because her work fits easily into the mainstream of high culture. No way. Opie is a lesbian artist who first grabbed attention with large color portraits of women who turned themselves into men, drag queens done up to outrageous perfection, and others who altered their god-given bodies with elaborate tattoos, piercings, and "cuttings." By far the most shocking—even excruciating—are two pictures of Opie herself. The first, *Cutting Number One* (1995), present a childlike drawing of two stick-figure girls holding hands in front of a house, cut into the artist's bare back. Opie followed with *Pervert*, which pictures that very word meticulously cut in florid script above her bare breasts, while her arms are pierced with needles.

Opie's unblinking images of herself, close friends, lovers, and other members of the gay and lesbian community are meticulously crafted to dignify people who are often ridiculed as freaks or vilified as the deviant dregs of society. Highly detailed and technically perfect, the startling portraits balance aggressive physicality with emotional vulnerability. "Her portraits are important for two reasons," says Smith. "They are documents of a sort of subcultural community of which she is a part. At the same time, they are highly estheticized reinterpretations of traditional portraits. She is reinventing the genre in a very up-to-date sociological context." Opie draws some of her inspiration from the 16th-century German painter Hans Holbein, whose powerful portraits of subjects including Henry VIII are, like hers, exquisitely detailed and set against vividly colored backgrounds.



Catherine Opie, *AIDS Activist*, from the '700 Nimes Road Portfolio,' 2010–11, pigment print.
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Pulling out an image of a bearded person, Opie says, “This is a portrait of Mike, one of my first dyke friends here in Los Angeles, who began taking hormones to become a man. When I share these portraits, I just identify them with the name and year it was taken. I don’t add any information like Man, Woman, F to M, M to F. It’s really important for me that the people are just who they are in the picture. They can’t be pathologized. It’s not about what their gender is.”

Working her way through the stack of portraits, largely done from 1991 to 1995, Opie intersperses fond remembrances of her subjects with a discussion of her motivation and philosophy. “I didn’t like the way the leather community was being represented in the mainstream culture,” she says. “They think we are child molesters and everything that’s attached to that. We have had a bad rap. That was probably the biggest reason for doing the portraits, but I was also facing my own internal homophobia. Another big thing was that so many of my friends were dying of AIDS. I decided to do a body of work that was about being really out, and about being out about my sexuality, and being into S&M and leather and stuff like that. Instead of just showing the tattoos and the piercings and the markings on the body, I wanted to do a series of portraits of this community that were incredibly noble.”

To that end, Opie is interested in the frontal gaze. “I always tell the people I’m photographing not to look at the lens but to look through the lens,” she says. “I want them to look through you a little bit. I told them I wanted them to be in a really special place inside their heads, to be kind of dreamy and confident at the same time.”

In her self-portraits, however, no facial expression or body language softens the tough subject matter. Opie crops and frames her nude torso, which—at least in the eyes of mainstream culture—has been mutilated. Her back is to the audience in *Cutting Number One*. In *Pervert*, her head is covered with a black leather mask.

“In *Cutting Number One*, I wanted to use a childlike drawing to talk about the idea of a lesbian relationship,” she says. “It had to do with a breakup, after I was finally living with someone. But the portrait is obviously a political statement as well. Instead of the two stick figures being Mommy and Daddy, they could be Mommy and Mommy. “I drew this on a pad over and over for a year,” she continues. “Then I knew that I wanted to make it a piece and I wanted it to be on my back. I asked my friend, Judy Bamber, who is an artist and had never done any cuttings before, to do it because I knew she would be nervous and it wouldn’t be perfect. And yet, because she is very precise in her paintings, she would be really good. So it came out in a perfect way, where it does really feel like a child’s drawing.” And no, it wasn’t painful, Opie says. “It’s easy to go through; you just get in that place in your head.”

For *Pervert*, Opie required the services of an experienced cutter, Raelyn Gallina, in San Francisco. “When I made this piece it was really about what was happening in the country around Jesse Helms and all the stuff that was coming down about perversion,” Opie says. “I wanted my identity to be hidden, but yet I would wear what people would call me on my chest, reclaiming it in the most elegant and beautiful way. There’s a dual thing that happens in this self-portrait. Because of the cutting and the needles, it shocks people. But it’s so elegant, it makes them come back. They end up being able to deal with it.”

Asked if the cutting has healed, Opie opens the neck of her shirt to reveal the letters, no longer red but clearly visible in raised white lines. “I have this beautiful scar,” she says. “It’s really perfect.”

The happily scarred woman who made this alarming artwork is a native midwesterner, born in 1961 in Sandusky, Ohio. Her first 12 years were spent in what she calls “an artsy-craftsy environment, during the height of the craft period.” The family business was novelty boxes and plaques, and her mother did sewing and decoupage.

When Opie was almost nine, she discovered the world of photographer Lewis Hine, who documented the plight of child laborers at the turn of the century. Her class in school had been assigned to write on child labor laws. She wrote about Hine instead and requested a camera for her ninth birthday. Her parents bought her a Kodak Instamatic, and she immediately got to work photographing her friends and neighborhood. “Basically what I did then, and I still do,” she notes, “is wander around with my camera to describe my relationship to the world and where I live.”

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Catherine Opie, *The Quest for Japanese Beef*, from the '700 Nimes Road Portfolio,' 2010–11, pigment print.
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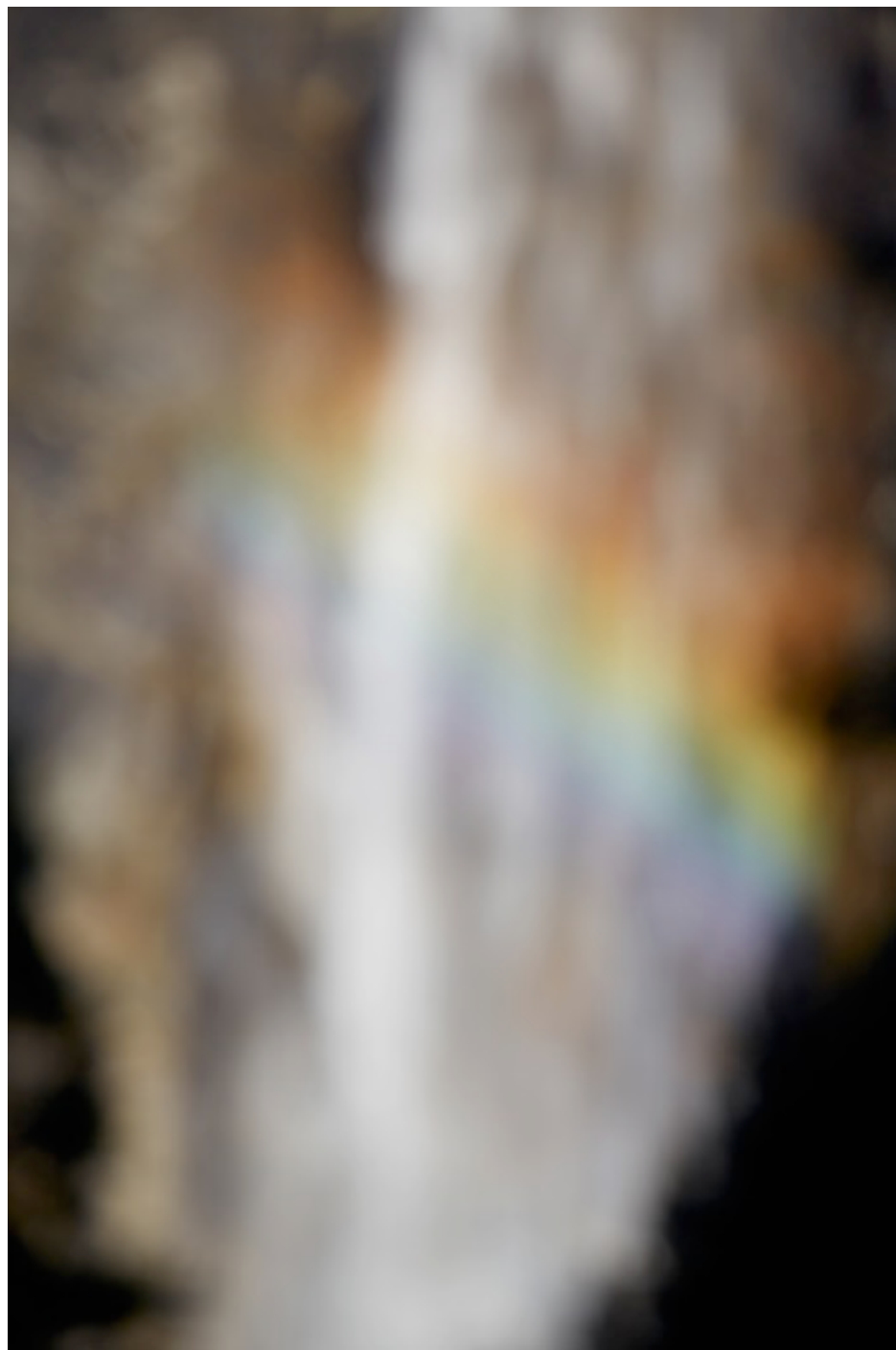
When she was 13, her father became ill and was advised to relocate to a warmer climate. The family moved to a planned community north of San Diego, where her father went into real estate, a booming market at the time. As she began to come to terms with her sexuality, she found her environment stifling and decided to spend her college years studying photography at the San Francisco Art Institute. At the time of her graduation, in 1985, she was essentially a street photographer and well on her way to becoming a self-described “total technical freak.”

Opie had no desire to return to Southern California, but the avant-garde visual-art program at California Institute of the Arts beckoned, so she entered graduate school there in 1986 and moved to Valencia, north of Los Angeles. Much to her horror, she found herself trapped in yet another sterile suburban community without a car. But she turned the situation to her advantage, wandering around in nearby neighborhoods and discovering a gold mine of subject matter in construction sites and model homes.

Simultaneously repulsed and attracted by the notion of a master-planned community full of ideal homes for ideal families, she developed a large body of work on the subject. She managed to persuade the “first family”—the development’s first occupants—to let her photograph the interior of their house. No people appear in the pictures, however, suggesting that such places are not designed for human habitation.

After graduating from CalArts in 1988, Opie moved to an area more to her liking, settling into a Victorian house in a dilapidated section of central Los Angeles. Once again she quickly found a new subject, a subway construction project that she photographed on Sunday mornings when workers were off-duty. She’d load her camera into a backpack and climb down into the tunnel to labor in isolation.

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Catherine Opie, *Untitled #12*, 2015 pigment print.

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Catherine Opie, *Mary*, 2012, pigment print.

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Like most unknown artists, Opie couldn't make a living from her work, so in 1990 she accepted an offer to design a photography laboratory at the University of California at Irvine and stayed on as the technician until 1994. By then her portraits had created a stir, and she was offered a one-year teaching position at the University of California at Los Angeles. Then Irvine invited her back, but she agreed to return only as an instructor. Now she teaches color photography and issues in contemporary photography and serves as the department's resident color expert.

The brutal commute to Orange County led to Opie's soft-focus series of freeway photographs. *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight wrote about the small (2 1/8-by-6 1/5-inch) platinum prints: "Once seen, they'll change

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your freeway experience. Looking at the soft, silvery pictures of gigantic concrete pilings and soaring roadbeds is rather like looking at 19th-century documentary photographs of the Holy Land or Egypt's Valley of the Kings."

Opie still lives near downtown L.A., but she has moved to Koreatown. Predictably, this has led to a new body of work: 16-by-41 inch Iris prints depicting mini-malls. These were recently on view at Jay Gorney Modern Art in New York, where her works sell for between \$2,000 and \$6,500. These banal strip malls that seem to have cropped up on every available corner of Los Angeles are cluttered with signage advertising everything from a travel agency and an automotive supply shop to a nail parlor, a photography studio, and a Mexican fast-food restaurant. But Opie finds them fascinating, in part because they reflect the shifting ethnicities of the city's neighborhoods.

The photographs of mini-malls are devoid of people—like the model homes, subway tunnels, freeways, and a series depicting rather forlorn houses in some of Los Angeles's priciest neighborhoods. "I like to empty out L.A.," she says. "It has to do with history and what's going to be left when we are gone."

Because she photographs so many different subjects and uses a variety of techniques, her work may appear to lack a strong thread of continuity. "I straddle a lot of camps," Opie admits. But in formal terms, her photographs are generally characterized by a preference for clean images and frontality, and a propensity for beautifying her subjects. Her work is also informed by a sense of community. The photographs recently on view at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art "form part of a longstanding investigation of the physical and social landscape of Los Angeles that has preoccupied the artist since her student days," curator Elizabeth Smith writes in the exhibition catalogue.

Being thrust into the public eye has been a rather "surreal" experience, Opie says. "But it's been incredible. This award just came out of the blue, at a time when I was really worried about my job at Irvine. Just when I was thinking I should be running after the WNBA [Women's National Basketball Association] to try to be their team photographer or figure out how to have a commercial career, I got my contract renewed at Irvine and I got this fantastic award."

But success in the art world can't be taken for granted, she realizes. The important thing is to stay focused on her work. Fortunately, that comes naturally. "I have only one thing I like to do in my life, besides being on vacation, and that's taking pictures," she says.

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