

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Catherine Opie creates monumental work for Los Angeles courthouse Artist reveals how Yosemite Falls inspired her biggest public art project so far



For her biggest public art project yet, a commission-in-progress for the new federal courthouse in downtown Los Angeles, the artist Catherine Opie has chosen one of the most romantic images of the American West—Yosemite Falls—as the subject of grandly scaled work that will bring some natural majesty to the interior of the boxy steel-and-glass building due to open next summer.

Opie has put her own spin on the image, finding a scene with gentle rushing waters and capturing the waterfall's reflection in the river below, which visually complicates the scene. And she does something that would have seemed perverse to Ansel Adams or Carleton Watkins: she cuts up her sublime subject into six parts to be hung on different floors of the building, visible from a central atrium.

From the atrium's lowest levels, Yosemite Falls will appear in reflection only—more “water rise” than waterfall. As you climb to the higher floors, you will get to see the source of the water itself and perhaps see three or four prints—each a massive 2.6m by 3.5m—at once.

“One of the things I liked is that you have to hike [up] the building to experience different moments of Yosemite Falls,” Opie says. “But never do you get to see the image in its totality.” The disruption of the image evokes the loss of personal liberties that many people entering the court system or heading to prison experience. “The notion of fracturing a photograph suggests the fracturing of life,” she says.

Opie's original proposal to the General Services Administration, a government organisation that helps federal agencies develop or manage their buildings, was to use Yosemite's changing seasons to explore the passage of time. But she said the region's drought got in her way: “By summertime there was no water, and by winter, no snow,” she says. The new idea crystallised when she found herself near a bridge over the river that gave her a clear mirror image.

Left: Catherine Opie's images of Yosemite Falls. Photo: Catherine Opie Studio © Catherine Opie, Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

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The new federal courthouse is due to open next summer. © Skidmore; Owings & Merrill LLP, 2015, all rights reserved

Next year, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles is showing work from Opie's new portrait series inspired by Old Masters paintings (Portraits, 30 January-22 May 2016) while the Museum of Contemporary Art's branch at the Pacific Design Center is showing her quasi-anthropological Elizabeth Taylor series, going deep into the late celebrity's house and shoe closets (700 Nimes Road, 23 January-8 May 2016). Her first show with the New York gallery Lehmann Maupin will also open in January, across both of its Manhattan spaces.

<http://theartnewspaper.com/news/catherine-opie-goes-to-court/>