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A Retrospective of Many Artists, All of Them One Woman’

“Untitled #40 (Freeways)” by Catherine Opie, part of a midcareer retrospective of the photographer’s work at the Guggenheim. CreditCourtesy of Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

“The difference is spreading,” Gertrude Stein wrote. So it has, and it thoroughly infiltrates “Catherine Opie: American Photographer” at the Guggenheim Museum. In this strong midcareer retrospective, Ms. Opie, who is 47 and lives in Los Angeles, comes across, at first look, as several artists in one, none of them exactly like the others but all of them interconnected.

Best known as a portraitist, Ms. Opie is also a photographer of landscapes, cityscapes, architecture, still lifes and lifestyles. She is an insider and an outsider: a documentarian and a provocateur; a classicist and a maverick; a trekker and a stay-at-home; a lesbian feminist mother who resists the gay mainstream; an American — birthplace: Sandusky, Ohio — who has serious arguments with her country and culture.

Ms. Opie initially gained attention in the early 1990s with a series of eye-catching studio portraits and a pair of indelible self-portraits. Her sitters were gay, lesbian and transgendered men and women drawn from her circle of fellow artists and intimates, many of them associated with the sadomasochist leather subculture in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

A fringe group within the larger gay population, they were defined by a range of specific role-playing sexual practices and also by a personal style that favored heavy piercing, tattooing and theatrical costuming, all on parade in Ms. Opie’s photographs of drag kings, leather queens and other ranks of S&M royalty.

These pictures arrived in the midst of culture wars that had helped consolidate the religious right as a political force, and that spurred queer artists to insistently advertise their deviant identity. Even in that heated atmosphere, Ms. Opie’s portraits delivered a jolt. Included in the 1995 Whitney Biennial, they were like shock troops crashing a mannerly art-world party.

It is some measure of how widely difference has since soaked into the culture that the portraits have a milder effect today. Ranged around a gallery in the Guggenheim’s North Tower, they look less like alien beings than the mutual friends and lovers they were, each lavishly and tenderly depicted against a solid-color ground, a format Ms. Opie borrowed from Holbein’s portraits of 16th-century aristocrats.

“Divinity Fudge,” (1997).Credit Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

The two self-portraits are a different matter. They still hit hard. In one, the artist sits shirtless, facing away from the camera; a childlike drawing of a house and two women holding hands has been freshly razor-cut into the skin of her back.

In the second, from a year later, she faces forward but with her head encased in a tight, eyeless black-leather mask. Rows of needles, meticulously spaced apart, pierce her arms. The word “pervert” in decorative lettering has been sliced like a bleeding tattoo into her bare chest.

The picture is extremely, radioactively aggressive. With its blood and needles, it embodies Ms. Opie’s fury at the homophobia of politicians who, among other things, demonized AIDS sufferers. With its carved-in-flesh “pervert,” it is her vehement response to the mainstream gay and feminist cultures that rejected the radical challenges she and her friends had made to “normality.”

For obvious reasons, queerness has dominated the conversation around Ms. Opie’s art. It should. Few artists of her generation have as consistently and brilliantly shown queerness to be the capacious category it is. Everything in an artist’s work can flow from it, be colored by it, and be most fully understood in its light. Yet nothing need be artificially defined or delimited by it.

As if to give proof, Ms. Opie’s next project, the 1995 “Freeways” series, was a complete departure from studio portraiture. It was made up of about 40 very small, black-and-white platinum-print images of Los Angeles freeways empty of cars and people. Presented in a salon-style hanging, the series gave workaday highways, filmed mostly from

below, the chill, glamorous monumentality of spaceships, but made them dark and dim, as if viewed through the mists of a distant planet.

Other urban series followed, among them color photographs of Los Angeles house facades, and black-and-white shots of minimalls across the city. Again, no people, but an implied human presence. Homes in Bel Air hunker down, blank and tense, behind gates, fences, surveillance cameras. By contrast, minimalls, cobbled-together commercial stretches in low-income neighborhoods, are open to all, judging by their signs in Korean, Chinese, Thai and Spanish, as well as English.

Exclusion versus inclusion is one of Ms. Opie's recurrent themes. After shooting freeways in 1995, she drove cross-country to photograph women living in domestic partnerships. The result was a group of deeply felt but unsentimental marriage portraits taken in living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms and back yards from San Francisco, to Tulsa, to New York; homages to families that America knew nothing about.

The bottom-line subject here, as elsewhere in Ms. Opie's work, was community — elusive, longed-for, temporary, lost — and she addressed it again and with near-abstract subtlety in two landscape series. For one, she photographed a cluster of ice houses set up for fishing on a frozen lake in northern Minnesota. Two years later she took pictures of surfers waiting for waves to gather in becalmed California ocean water.

Both series concentrate on groups of people bound together, however briefly, by passionate interests. Both take distant views of their subjects, reducing them — shelters and figures — to specks in a wide pictorial field. Both use the same compositional scheme: equal-size registers of water and sky broken by a thin horizon line.

"Flipper, Tanya, Chloe & Harriet, San Francisco, California," a photograph from 1995 by Ms. Opie, is also part of the show. CreditSolomon R. Guggenheim Museum

At the Guggenheim, the two series face each other in a long gallery. Ms. Opie has called the arrangement her version of the Rothko Chapel. But just as pertinent is a reference to 19th-century American landscape painting — Fitz Hugh Lane with wetsuits — and its motif of the lone individual subsumed into a larger whole, be it the New World, Nature, or the Sublime, or God.

Ms. Opie herself has been absorbed into family. After years of living solo, in 2001 she bought a house in Los Angeles with a partner, the painter Julie Burleigh. In 2002 she gave birth to a son. In a beautiful 2004 self-portrait she cradles and breast-feeds her child, and you can still see the word "pervert" spelled out, faintly, in scars on her chest.
The main work from 2004, though, is her largest, most varied and most relaxed photographic sequence, "In and Around the Home," a kind of snapshot album of everyday life. A child plays in the sun after breakfast, Ms. Burleigh stands on a deck with one of the couple's pet dogs. Gradually the eye moves out from this warm domestic core into a more complicated world.

We see a Martin Luther King Day parade in Ms. Opie's predominantly African-American neighborhood; a street shrine to a slain gang member; scenes of the Iraq war on a television screen; and the faces of George Bush, of the comatose Terry Schiavo and Pope John Paul II. The final two pictures are a matched set: in one, a rainbow-striped kite flies high in the sky, in the other, the kite is replaced by a police helicopter.

Significantly, Ms. Opie has hung the kite picture on the left, the one of the helicopter on the right. Had the order been reversed, the sequence would have had a more positive and hopeful ending. As it is, it concludes on a note of threatening uncertainty

The overall order of the exhibition, which has been organized by Jennifer Blessing, curator of photography, with Nat Trotman, an assistant curator, is far less clear, but this is a space problem. Individual series appear intact and look great. The chronological order skips around over four floors, which wouldn't, of course, have been true in the museum's central spiral.

In the end, this matters little. The superficially un-alike strands of her art cohere. "I am an American photographer," Ms. Opie says in a catalog interview. "I have represented this country and this culture. And I'm glad that there is a queer, out, dyke artist that's being called an American photographer." Difference, in short, is the point of cohesion, the center of her art. And its circumference, on the evidence of this survey, keeps widening.

"Catherine Opie: American Photographer" continues through Jan. 7 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; (212) 423-3500.

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