

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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### Catherine Opie Discusses Her Three L.A. Exhibits



In Opie's Long Beach show, the horizons of the photos line up with the real horizon seen through the windows.

*PHOTO BY CARA GARCIA*

**Photographer Catherine Opie is perhaps best known for her portraits featuring the heavily pierced and tattooed bodies of the LGBT community, or the sweaty, clear-eyed optimism of high school football players.** She has captured frozen landscapes littered with pastel-colored ice-fishing cabins and fluid ones bobbing with surfers awaiting their next wave. And for the past 25 years, Opie has documented Los Angeles, where the Ohio native chose to stay after receiving her masters at CalArts, rather than return to the Bay Area, where she'd studied as an undergrad. "I was much more interested in the art scene here," she says. "I felt that in relationship to the city I had a lot more to explore."

Currently, three exhibitions are up at three L.A.-area institutions — WuHo Gallery and Regen Projects, both in Hollywood, and the Long Beach Museum of Art — featuring photographs that show how her exploration of L.A. as both a subject and a backdrop has come to shape her work.

On a raucous strip of Hollywood Boulevard, Woodbury University's WuHo Gallery is an excellent place to begin. "Catherine Opie: In & Around L.A." honors the artist as the 2013 recipient of an architectural photography award from the Julius Shulman Institute, even though their bodies of work are markedly different. Shulman photographed iconic landmarks of modernism; Opie mostly focuses on the vernacular. Shulman was famous for inserting people as

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props into his highly stylized and staged shots; Opie's architectural work is almost completely devoid of humans. "Julius has called me out in public as the worst photographer in Los Angeles," says Opie, recalling a 2005 event for the photography book *Looking at Los Angeles*, in which they both appear. "But Ben Stiller was sitting next to me and defended me, so it all turned out okay," she laughs.

"I think when people find out she's our fourth winner they're taken by surprise, and I like that a lot," says Emily Bills, co-curator and director of the Julius Shulman Institute. "But she's been photographing the built environment since before 1994, when she became known for the *Freeways* series." Three of the works from that iconic series are in the WuHo show — photos of massive freeways minimized like Shrinky Dink toys down to the size and shade of a pencil sketch, tiny and intimate in a way one could never imagine hulking infrastructure to be.

But like much of her Los Angeles photography, *Freeways* tells a secondary story — in this case, how the city worked to knit its transportation system back together after the Northridge earthquake, by showing reconstruction of the damaged interchanges.

The act of mapping our cultural diversity is highlighted in another series at the WuHo Gallery, *Shopkeepers* (2011), which has not been shown in Los Angeles before. After photographing strip malls in a previous series, Opie stepped inside the local businesses in her own West Adams neighborhood to take portraits of their owners amid the vibrant cacophony of their auto body shops and carnicerías. Near those photos, an episode of the PBS artist-biography series *Art 21* featuring Opie plays, and you can watch her walk the blocks near her house, tripod in hand, to meet her neighbors.

Another series of Opie's work, *Houses* (1995), addresses the grotesque mansions of Bel-Air and Beverly Hills that adorn their plain stucco exteriors with Grecian columns or Italianate ironwork. "They were daring in relationship to the architectural style that they wanted to achieve, which is odd and funny and amazing," she says. "I was thinking about how my friends had tried on these different kinds of identities with tattoos and piercings borrowed from different cultures." Standing in the street with an 8x10 camera, Opie captured each house's full-frontal, extreme identity quest. You see it immediately: the hideous gates wrap around houses like tattoos, the ridiculous front door panels like nose piercings. "It's all about facade and body manipulation, just like her portraits," says Bills.

**A very different view** of Los Angeles — one that most residents never see — is found in the Long Beach Museum of Art's "Twelve Miles to the Horizon," which depicts Opie's 2009 journey on one of the Korean shipping company Hanjin's container ships from Busan, South Korea, to the Port of Los Angeles. The passage takes 10 days, or 10 sunsets and 10 sunrises, which Opie photographed each day.

Even more striking is the way the show is exhibited in an oceanfront gallery. The photographs were specifically hung to re-create the same infinite horizon that Opie experienced on the ship. "The horizon lines are all set up in such a way that each one stays equal to the others," according to Sue Ann Robinson, director of collections for the museum. "As you're standing in the gallery, then the horizon continues outside the windows." Adds Opie, "You can look out and see the Hanjin dock."

The exhibition also includes the ship's log and Opie's journals and drawings, which Robinson says give even more insight into the way Opie uses her photography to create a sense of time and place. "She goes back and forth between unpopulated spaces and populated spaces," says Robinson. "She speaks about these ocean views almost like they're paintings."

Painting is a theme that runs through Opie's third show, a series of brand-new works at Regen Projects. The most striking pieces are portraits of friends and family — "people I like to look at," she says — featuring some L.A. luminaries like Rodarte fashion designers Kate and Laura Mulleavy, and Diana Nyad, the journalist and long-distance swimmer. With dramatic lighting, streaks of bright red blood and stark black backgrounds, the photographs evoke classical 17th-century portraiture. "Utilizing techniques of chiaroscuro, color and formal composition, the new portraits are highly reminiscent of old-master paintings," says Jennifer Loh, director of Regen Projects. "Caravaggio immediately comes to mind." According to Opie, this is her way of exploring her new identity — what it means to be 51, pondering her menopausal body.

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Alternating between these works are untitled landscapes, which represent a departure for Opie. Compared to the portraits, which here are so razor-sharp you feel you might be able to reach out and tap a Mulleavy sister on the shoulder, these landscapes are dreamlike and out-of-focus. "Cathy has never before utilized abstraction in her photographs," says Loh, who notes that the works are made from racking the focus (changing the focus in the middle of the shot) on the camera, without any digital manipulation. "The new landscapes float in abstraction and are reduced to elementary blurred light drawings."

Here, Opie's location and subject is a mystery — and that's how she wants to keep it. "With all of us going to national parks like the Grand Canyon and posting it on Facebook — 'I'm in the Grand Canyon!' — how do we take notice of the sublime anymore?" she asks. She hopes that viewers will create their own relationships with the landscapes. "People make their own assumptions," she says. "People look at one of them and think it's a volcano." (It's not a volcano.)

While these new works at Regen aren't specifically about Los Angeles, they do reflect a theme often present in her work — making a connection with something that makes us uncomfortable. "A lot of these questions have come out in my own history of dealing with homophobia," she says. "Why do we have these irrational ideas about 'the other'?" Through the diverse facets of Los Angeles that she chooses to document, Opie not only transforms the way we see the city, she asks us to define — or maybe redefine — our role within it.

It's notable that one piece in this unofficial regionwide Opie exhibition can be found outside gallery walls, on a billboard at the intersection of Highland and Santa Monica, just above a Walgreens. A rather surreal image — a flame bursting from liquid — is juxtaposed with the ordinariness of the actual surrounding strip malls and sprawl that Opie has dutifully documented for the last quarter century.

Like all her photographs, it's beautiful, haunting and gloriously weird. And it's impossible to stop thinking about. We could all use a little Catherine Opie on our commutes, pleasantly jarring us out of our comfort zones.

*"Catherine Opie: In & Around L.A." at WuHo Gallery runs through March 24 ([architecture.woodbury.edu/wuho](http://architecture.woodbury.edu/wuho)), as does "Twelve Miles to the Horizon" at the Long Beach Museum of Art ([lbma.org](http://lbma.org)). Opie's show at Regen Projects runs through March 29 ([regenprojects.com](http://regenprojects.com)).*

<http://www.laweekly.com/arts/catherine-opie-discusses-her-three-la-art-exhibits-2613315>