

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Harnish, Tracey. 'Catherine Opie: Bearing Witness and the Sublime'. *The Huffington Post Online*. 5 May 2013

february 22, 2013

### HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

## Catherine Opie: Bearing Witness and the Sublime



Julie and Pig Pen. 2012, Courtesy of Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

"It's a very Cathy Opie moment in LA," Catherine Opie says and then laughs her deep and happy laugh. She just received the Julius Shulman Institute award for excellence in photography and has a corresponding show at the Woodbury University Hollywood Gallery; the Long Beach Museum of Art is exhibiting her Twelve Miles to the Horizon series, and her new body of work is on display at Regen Projects. Indeed it is a Catherine Opie moment. Since the '80s, Opie has been photographing distinct kinds of communities. While the physicality of time and place is a part of her narrative, it has always been the capturing of a combination of diversity and similarity within very different communities that interests her. Opie reveals what is unique and unseen in groups of people that range from the queer community to surfers and football players. She uncovers what we may not already know to show us what we have in common with one another. Her photographs of freeways, Beverly Hills homes, and cityscapes devoid of people remind of just how much it is the community that fills these structures that gives us identity.

I interviewed Opie in her studio in West Adams right before her new work was to be installed in the gallery. We sat in chairs facing her new portraits and talked about politics, portraiture, and driving around LA.

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**OPIE:** One of the greatest things about being an artist is, as you get older if you keep working hard in relationship to what you want the world to be and how you want it to become, there is a history of interesting growth that resonates with different moments in your life. Like a family photo album, the bodies of my work are like markers in my life and what I was thinking about at any given moment. I really appreciate that people continue to follow along. I am not someone who has a singular identity in relationship to the bodies of work that I make.

**TH:** There is a continuity to your work that makes perfect sense and then it seems, out of the blue, you do the Football Landscape series. The physicality of where one lives is often a symbol of community in your work. This series of photographs of high school football players felt like a departure in some respects. How did it fit into this theme of community?



Football Landscape #19 (Poway vs. Mira Mesa, Poway, CA). 2007. Courtesy of Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

**OPIE:** All my nephews play football and Julie (Cathy's partner) comes from a big Catholic family in Louisiana. We were going for a visit for 10 days in August and I was wondering, what am I going to do for 10 days in a small town in Louisiana? Then I asked my nephew if I could photograph him play at football practice. I'm thinking, let's just go look at this, it will give me something to do, get me out of the house. Then I became aware of all of these moments within this, what that community contains, in terms of performing and masculinity, in terms of these young men, with a good portion of them going off to war to be soldiers. What is it to bear witness to this culture that is utterly American? This also followed the Guggenheim show, which was called "Catherine Opie: American Photographer," titled by Jennifer Blessing. I thought, let's really go American here and look at the site of the high school football field as the American landscape. How can we extend this idea of what an American landscape is? Also I was thinking

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about these in between moments on the football field that aren't the Sports Illustrated moments in the same way the surfers are just waiting for a wave, (referring to her "Surfers" series) kind of changing that landscape as a new way of bearing witness to it and realizing the space around the football field. Everybody assumes that the high school football player is going to be the bully, but what if he's really a closeted very vulnerable gay boy whose dad has made him play football? What if he's utterly into the idea of performing that masculinity? Who are we to say that they are only a singular identity?

**TH:** In your early work you address the fact that you didn't like the way the queer community was being portrayed and then you took something as mundane as football and revealed the same thing, that people are not what we assume. In this series you address a community that is very familiar to the average person.

**OPIE:** It's revered; it's the epitome of American culture. But who is to say what the epitome of American culture is? That's the beautiful thing for me, that we are all actually the epitome of American culture, whether I'm photographing immigration protests, a Boy Scout jamboree, or a Michigan women's music festival.

**TH:** What you're doing is addressing that there is this huge rainbow of subtleties within our society and that our political conversations are so completely generalized that they lose meaning. It becomes one side versus another; it's all talking points that have been over-simplified. I think that most of us have a lot more in common than we realize — across the nation.

**OPIE:** I think that we do and that's what we forget. I'm a complete supporter of Obama and kind of in love with him. I was born in 1961 and he's born in 1961, I look at this idea of citizenship that he is calling forth, the responsibility of citizenship is a really interesting way to create dialog of community. I don't remember when the last president of the United States asked us to be good citizens. I think we need bullet points in mapping out what that means, there is too much rhetoric out there and people can't break through it.

In the book Inauguration, there is a really good moment where I was standing in that incredibly historic event of Obama being inaugurated as the first African American President. The book takes you through the hundred photographs of the absolute glory that it was for everybody to wave those American flags at that moment. As soon as it was over, the mall was completely littered with American flags and trash. That is the juxtaposition in my mind of democracy. In one moment you can literally wave this flag in relationship to your patriotism and the celebration of this historic moment and then in the next, you can just drop it in the dust afterwards? That's what I think is incredibly complicated about our society, just in terms of setting those two conversations in play with one another.

**TH:** Does your new work play into these issues that are so important to you?

**OPIE:** This new work is actually the step away from a political agenda. I think that turning 51 and looking at my life in relationship to things I have made, I decided to go to a very internal space. So they are allegories, they are moments out of dreams, they're using friends and my son and people that I know. There isn't necessarily an agenda with this body of work, except possibly to get the viewer to think about the relationship to the sublime in terms of a history of portraiture and art making. That a photograph can move us in this way, of these bodies emerging out of black into a kind of a quiet seduction. Just like in the other portraits I made, those were very seductive as well but they contained a certain politic. In these portraits, the politic exists because this is just who I am and looking at my life. The abstract landscapes really serve as the departure of landscape for me, because I am known for making utterly completely clear photographs. This is a lens-based abstraction so it's basically racking the focus of the lens of very iconic places that we go to, to seek nature. But at this point I'm talking about it on a cognitive level of relationship to beauty. Do we even need our cell phones to go to the Sequoia National Forest and bear witness to it, tweet it and put it on our Facebook page, to show that we experience nature? How do I still take what is real and is lens based versus a Photoshop recreation, but hopefully participate within that dialog? When I go to Alaska and I take that amazing photograph of the glacier, ultimately, I love that photograph but what does it do? I think I have been asking myself a lot of questions over the last five to six years, what does landscape photography do for us at this point and how does it serve us? This is an extension of that exploration; that will be mixed in with these portraits so that this becomes as much of a head space as Kate and Laura (Mulleavy) sewing a blood drip.

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One of the key shows that I am probably riffing on was two years ago in March, I was in London doing an exhibition of the black and white photos from “Girlfriends” that showed at the Hammer, and during that time I saw the Da Vinci show at the National Gallery. An amazing person in education allowed me to go in an hour before everyone else in queue, so I got to be alone with all of the work. The portrait of Oliver with his mouse, Mrs. Nibbles, is the closest relation to an actual portrait painting in the show, “Lady with an Ermine” by Da Vinci. The next show I saw was Richter’s retrospective at the Tate, which was the first time he showed his portraits with his abstract paintings. It did this thing where I was like; ok, I want to have a dialog with this, this is interesting.



From the book: Rodarte, Catherine Opie, Alec Soth, Published in 2011. (c) Catherine Opie

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*We face a portrait of the sisters Kate and Laura Mulleavy of Rodarte. I ask Cathy about how her relationship came about with the sisters, referencing the book collaboration she did with them along with Alex Soth in 2011. Cathy tells me that she met them at a Gagosian dinner party and we talk about what it was like to work with them.*

**OPIE:** I think in a certain way (working on) that book allowed me to enter this place of work for these portraits as well, because I was often shooting on black in that book which I usually don't do. I knew how I wanted to photograph them, I told them the allegory that I imagined for them, that Laura tells Kate a secret. Then I asked Julie, my partner who crafts embroideries with birds, to embroider a blood drip, because there is a theme of red and blood throughout the body of work. It's a very natural moment shared between sisters and they were thrilled because they had never seen a portrait of them like this. What I really love is that they are sisters and these two (Opie points to another portrait of two men), Michael and Anthony look like brothers but they are also lovers, there is this nice idea of connection. Julie and Pig Pen (another portrait on the wall facing us), who I have been shooting for years, are kissing with blood dripping down; it's a very romantic show actually. It's extremely romantic.

**TH:** It is also very mythic, I think of fables when I look at this work.

**OPIE:** That's where the allegory comes into play. The portraits extend beyond a potential narrative that you can have in your mind in the same way the landscapes do on a cognitive level. So it is about that relationship to photographs extending a narrative, but not in the same way that Crewdon (Gregory) deals with narrative. It's not staged enough that it is about film, it's about the history of portrait making.

**TH:** I read an interview where you were being asked about the Freeway series and you said driving is actually very romantic, like when you are driving at night, it's warm and you can put the windows down and you have the music blasting.

**OPIE:** I really love to drive. It's really hard for me to be a passenger, even though I get to look around a little bit more, but I've gotten really good at driving and looking.

**TH:** People complain about the traffic but there is this whole other element to LA driving, which is about how you can choose to experience the city.

**OPIE:** That's what people don't understand, they need to get over all of the bad things about Los Angeles and decide to try and experience the city in terms of all the things the city offers that are amazing. It's really crowded and rush hour sucks. I know. I have to drive my son back and forth to school, he goes to school on campus at UCLA and we live in West Adams. It's a drag but then you just decide to take a different street. Don't go the same route, become a wanderer within your own city. Wander.

**TH:** And now you are going to have a billboard up across from the gallery. It's so iconic. Driving down Sunset Blvd., the billboards are such a big part of celebrity culture here and you are inundated with them from a young age even if you aren't conscious of it. They are constantly announcing that events are happening that you should pay attention to. Didn't you start driving up here (from the San Diego area) to LA when you were in high school?

**OPIE:** Yeah, I had my 1976 Plymouth Valiant and we'd go up to LA and go through the celebrity trash. It's sad, we were really bored. But it gave us something to do and I was the driver. I was always the driver with my friends. I still am.

It's been so interesting to experience the city through my son, before he could read, he read LA in relationship to the images that were on billboards and then all of a sudden the meaning completely changed once he could decipher the information. But from two to five, it's him talking to me about different images. Halloween is horrible for kids in this city, when all of the horror films come out and all the billboards that go up. It's like, Mom, don't go down that street because of that billboard. I'd be driving and say, "Oliver, close your eyes." It's always been a dream to have a billboard in LA, just to put it out there.

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*Opie and I talk a bit more about the Da Vinci show and I mention the recent Caravaggio show at LACMA; how the theatricality of that show corresponds to the cinematic portraiture she created in her new work.*

**OPIE:** It's a play with it all. Why do we keep going back to the Da Vinci's and the Caravaggio's and that time period of painting? Why has it held up? It is because of the seduction within the narrative that holds us as a viewer. I love to seduce. I am all about the seduction. Hey, I'm there man. I'll flirt with all of you.

Opie again laughs her deep and happy laugh.

Regen Projects, February 23 - March 29, 2013.