Merrick, Heidi. 'Shooting Star'. *Foam Magazine*. February 2013

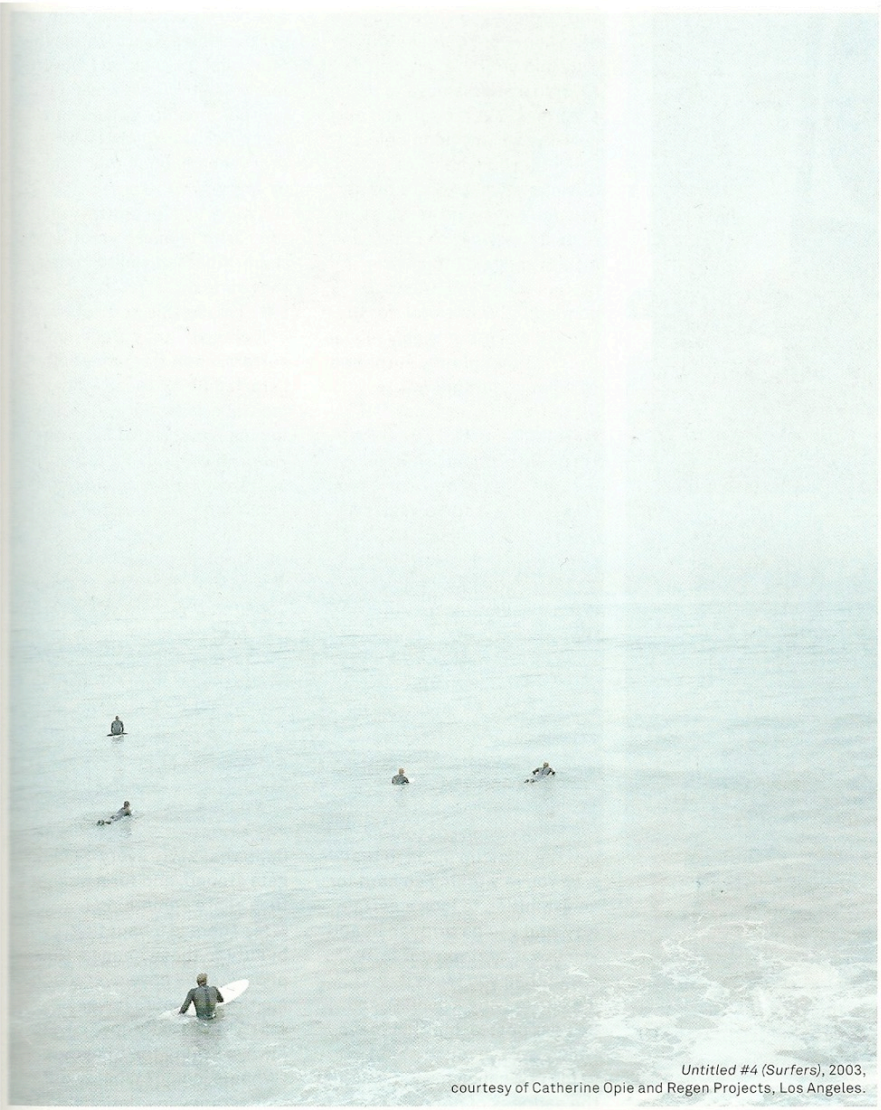
Heidi Merrick and Catherine Opie in the artist's LA studio surrounded by test prints for an upcoming series. RIGHT, TOP: *Oliver & Mrs. Nibbles*, 2012. RIGHT, BOTTOM: *Lawrence*, 2012.

Shooting Star

Fine-art photographer Catherine Opie lets *FOAM* Editor-at-Large Heidi Merrick into her LA studio.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JUDSON MORGAN

Catherine Opie is one of the premier contemporary artists and documentary photographers of our time. Her work—displayed in museums and galleries across the globe—explores political issues and subcultures with images of everything from members of the LGBT community to surfers and high school football players. *FOAM* Editor-at-Large Heidi Merrick talks to Opie about her new series, the artistic process and surfing.



Untitled #4 (Surfers), 2003,
courtesy of Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

> ***"I think I'm fortunate enough that the ideas haven't run out and I keep creating. One day they might run out and that's that."***

HEIDI MERRICK: Hi, Cathy! How are you?
CATHERINE OPIE: I'm well, how are you doing?
HM: I'm good. I loved the recent presentation of your new exhibition, Twelve Miles to the Horizon, at the Long Beach Museum of Art (on view until March 24). For 10 days you crossed the Pacific from Korea to Long Beach. It made me feel like I was on that cargo ship. Have you always been a boat person? Had you been on a boat like that before?
CO: I have been on a boat before but nothing like that; that was my first time going across the ocean. But growing up on Lake Erie, I would always be on little fishing boats with my grandfather, and I've been sailing in the Bay Area, but I've never gone on a ship journey before.
HM: I know this started because Hanjin Shipping offered you a crazy commission to go on one of their container ships and make a body of work. How did you decide what to shoot?
CO: I did a proposal that it would be these sunrises and sunsets [for each day of the voyage]. I went and made it, and they got the first edition of the body of work.
HM: Do you feel pressure to make your work beautiful because so much of it has been for the past 10 years?
CO: I don't worry about that too much because I change it up all the time, and I have a really strong aesthetic. I wanted these images to be beautiful. They're tough and they're smart all at the same time. So I think what's difficult is combining all of those things.

powwow

HM: Before you shoot, do you have your conceptual story fully laid out?

CO: No, I always have room for surprises. But it's somewhat perceived in my mind before I go into a body of work. Obviously, when you're there, you don't know if there's going to be a foggy day or that the clouds are going to do this certain thing. You create a conceptual framework for the body of work, but then you also get to be completely surprised by what comes out at the same time.

HM: I understand that. When I'm doing a collection, right before I'm finished with it and I have it all sized up, I have a deep moment of self-hatred.

CO: Wow, why is that?

HM: I don't know. I think I've given myself to something and then seeing it back at me just feels hard. I was wondering if you go through that at all when you're putting together a body of work?

CO: I go through different emotions. I think the dark moment that happens mostly is just out of sadness that I won't see the work up again in that way. You're working so hard for an exhibition to look a certain way, and you go through it, and you live it, and you get to see it and then you leave it. And it's like leaving a good friend. So I get post-exhibition blues, which isn't so much about being critical on myself, but just the sadness of not being able to continue to live with this thing that you want to look at.

HM: I like how you have a positive view of your art. I feel like it's more positive than a lot of people would expect from an artist of your caliber. I was wondering about your surfer series: Can you tell me what your relationship is to surfing now?

CO: I grew up in San Diego. When I moved from Ohio, when I was 13, I started surfing; we'd hike down the cliffs of Black's Beach with a longboard. I hope one day I'll actually be able to get back on a board, that's my relationship. [laughs] I would really like to ride a wave again. My relationship with surfing is the desire to go back to that teenage body that can do any wave.

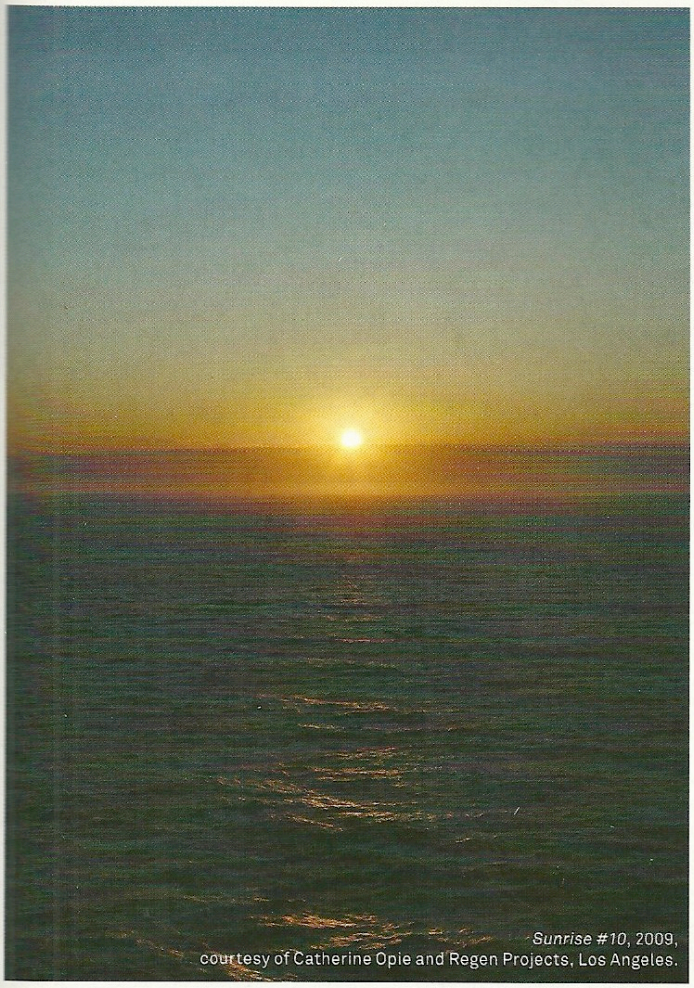
HM: There is an honesty in the surfer images, a reality to them. What led you to create that series?

CO: I made this body of work of icehouses that preceded the surfers, and after I made that, I started doing these kind of mental connections, like, ice-fishing houses also exist on the water; they're also a temporary community. How do we think about temporary communities?

Then I moved back to California because I was living in New York teaching at Yale, and I knew with June gloom and July fog I could basically [make the surfer series] in two months where it was completely foggy with just the figures waiting. It's the same way the fisherman are waiting, and it's the same kind of temporary community. You can have a big film producer, like a Brian Grazer, next to the dude that surfs every day and gets stoned, and for a moment they share something.

HM: There is a haunting beauty to those images. No surf photographs have ever touched me the way yours have.

CO: That's really special. I'm always asking the question, "What is iconic? What is our iconography in relationship to a picture language? How do we look at photographs?" We all know surfers are supposed to be surfing and be rad and be catching the best wave, but 90 percent of surfing is waiting. I felt like nobody ever really talked about that. They're always just thinking about the action [of surfing] being the pinnacle of it. But in a certain way, that's a very short moment. The trance, the moment where you actually transgress and have a complete mental connection, is in the



Sunrise #10, 2009, courtesy of Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Sunset #2, 2009, courtesy of Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

waiting. There's a euphoria that happens with the surf, but the waiting becomes this other really important part of the process, and nobody ever talks about that.

HM: Your new collection of work—which will be exhibited in late February in LA's Regen Projects—features large landscapes and classic portraits of some of the people in your life, including Rodarte designers Laura and Kate Mulleavy, long-distance extreme swimmer Diana Nyad, your trainer and your son. Why did you choose to photograph the people in your personal community for this series?

CO: They are people I want to look at and that I imagined these kind of portraits of. I often use people who I'm more comfortable with. I like to react with people who are in my mind's eye already, in terms of being in my life. It's all work that emerges from my imagination, which is unusual for me because I'm usually somewhat political within my practice. I don't know if it's turning 50 or what, but this is totally what is emerging out of me and my imagination. They're somewhat allegorical, and I don't usually do allegory.

HM: You have a nine-year-old son, Oliver. How has motherhood affected your work?

CO: I'm a little bit more tender, I suppose, like more soulful in a certain way. I think I am more open in terms of my own psychological makeup, more than I would have been earlier on as an artist. And I'm much more secure in that I have finally achieved this dream of having the family I've always wanted.

HM: With all the attention on you as an artist, does it add a certain pressure to do the next thing?

CO: I think I'm fortunate enough that the ideas haven't run out and I keep creating. One day they might run out and that's that. I'm always in pursuit of the next thing, and so far I keep thinking about things I want to make images of, so it's working out pretty well.

HM: It seems to me that developing a series would take a lot of time, and you're also a mom. How do you handle all of that?

CO: I think I balance it now. I don't travel as much as I did; I used to always be gone. I'm asked to do things like lecture or teach, and there's an enormous amount of nos because I actually want to be around my family and be a mom, not just an artist out in the world. There are a lot of things I turn down that I don't miss at all. It's important for me to make the work I get to make, but at the same time, it's equally important that my child actually knows I am his parent and I'm around for him.

HM: He seems really well loved, so I think you're doing a good job. I've been deeply moved by your work, and hearing you talk about how you do what you do has been wonderful for me and my process.

CO: That is so cool.