

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Nicola, 2014 © Catherine Opie, courtesy Regen Projects Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Portraits and Landscapes

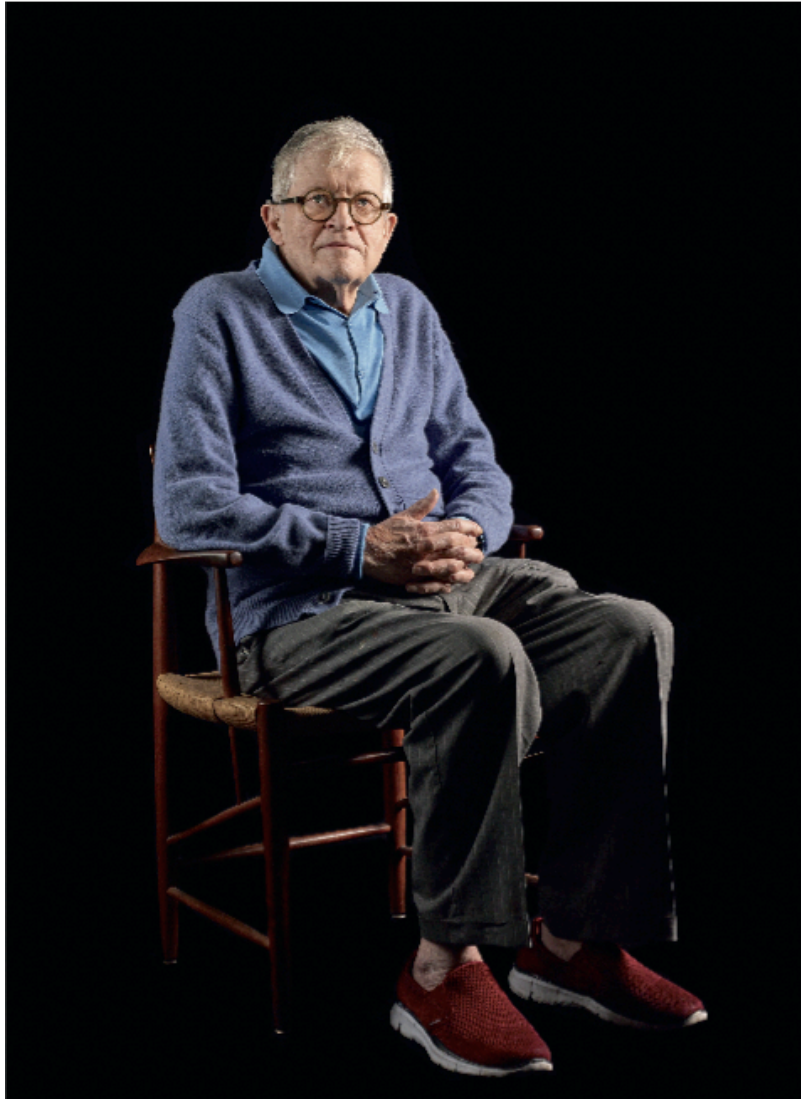
Words by Charlotte Jansen

Catherine Opie has been shooting portraits since the 1990s, capturing a generation of art-world legends, many of whom are personal friends. But in the selfie-saturated world of 2017 the portrait photograph has a very different role and Opie, 56, is increasingly concerned with the way we observe it. "How do you hold the attention?" she says. "That's one of the big questions I have about photography right now. A lot of us want to be moved and it's very problematic in the times we live in. There's an enormous amount

of anxiety people are feeling and I want to remind people that we can slow down."

At her first exhibition at Thomas Dane Gallery, opening on 03 October, Opie hopes to encourage us to do just this: to linger and look back at the close and distant past of portraiture. She first began to think about reconstructing portraiture after visiting an exhibition by contemporary painter Gerhard Richter and another by Leonardo Da Vinci in London five years ago. Inspired, the US photographer returned to London and began

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David, 2017 © Catherine Opie, courtesy Regen Projects Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

work on her project *Portraits and Landscapes*, photographing her subjects over three days at a rented studio in Lambeth, south London, which she arranged with modern Danish chairs. It features the faces of contemporary British-based artists, writers, designers and thinkers, among them Gillian Wearing, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jonathan Franzen, Isaac Julien, along with Thelma Golden and her husband Duro Olowu. "I like the relationship with the history of portraiture," she says. "[These artists] also 'look' at people and it ended up

being a really nice conversation piece for this body of work."

Though her photography is influenced by traditions in painting, shooting so many contemporary painters in London opened up a new approach. "One of the things I enjoy most when artists sit for me is to think about their own work and break the rules of it." David Hockney was a dream portrait, she says – someone she has known for a number of years and whom she sees as a "key component" when thinking about British artists today.

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Opie is equally informed by historical European portraits, such as those that hang on the walls of the Tudor Room at the National Portrait Gallery. "I don't necessarily think of portraits as being representational of the person, as I might not know their history," she says. "So I also go for the aesthetics." All the portraits in the exhibition are emphatically labelled only with first names; Anish, David, Gillian. "It's partly to dispel a certain notion of celebrity within ideas of portraiture. The familiarity is, in a sense, a way to deal with the formality; to create another way of thinking about portraits and people when you are making formal work." Her use of black backgrounds, as well as stripping away time and place, represent "the subconscious", Opie explains. "These works are more internal to an extent - they are less about narrative ideas or representation. They're more related to ideas about portraiture. I'm not there to describe the essence of a person, I'm there to share a moment with them."

Some say that a portrait ultimately reveals more about its creator than its subject and Opie acknowledges that there is a psychological element to the images. "In these photographs you are allowed to stare," she says. "It's this permission to gaze too long. All these things attached to different ideas of how we look at people, especially in an Instagram culture when we're flicking constantly through pictures. I'm really asking for the viewer to want look at these works with an extended gaze. That can often happen much more easily when people look out into an unknown space."

The exhibition is framed by a specifically created abstract landscape, looking down on the White Cliffs of Dover. "The first time I ever came to England was on a boat from Holland, and the White Cliffs of Dover were the first thing I saw from the vantage point of the port," she says. The landscape also connects the questions of photography in the now that preoccupy her portraits: "At this point in time, can we deal with an iconic landscape in relation to photography when everything is so photographed?"

"I'm going down this middle-aged path," she laughs. "I'm creating an existential crisis in my own work and life and asking the audience to go along with me." BJP

thomasdanegallery.com
@csopie