

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Photographer Catherine Opie on Portraits and Politics



Gillian, 2017

© Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

In 2011, after visiting a Leonardo da Vinci exhibition at London's National Gallery, the American fine art photographer Catherine Opie conceived the idea of shooting a series of portraits and landscapes inspired by the Old Masters. Last night, for her first show with Thomas Dane Gallery in London, a new chapter in this series was unveiled. Opie chose friends and people in her creative sphere as subjects, including artists (Anish Kapoor, David Hockney, Gillian Wearing and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye); fashion designers (Duro Olowu and Rick Owens), the writer Jonathan Franzen and the curator Thelma Golden – photographed against the same black background, and lit in such a way that they glow like embers, allowing each one's individuality to speak for itself.

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“I’ve never had any interest in recreating existing works,” Opie explains in her soothing contralto. “What I find enticing about Old Masters is the allegory they create of the world at the time they were painted.” As one of the greatest living documentarians of the American landscape, sociopolitically as well as literally, Opie’s images capture our zeitgeist the same way that Walker Evans’ encapsulated the effects of the Great Depression, or Ansel Adams eternalised the breathtaking beauty of the threatened natural world through his studies of Yosemite National Park. It was Opie’s radiant photographs of Lake Michigan that, in 2009, caught the eye of Barack Obama, who had the works mounted on the walls of the White House, where they remained for his eight years as president. The open expanse of water no doubt provided the most powerful man on the planet with moments of serenity, in a world that Opie describes as “going too damn fast!”



David, 2017

© Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery, London



Cathy (London), 2017

© Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

She is acutely aware of how burdensome images can be in the age of Instagram. “We didn’t even have an answering machine when I was growing up,” she remembers. “If people called and you weren’t home, the phone just kept ringing. Now we’re expected to engage constantly, but it just seems like a lot of noise.” For that reason, Opie says, it was important for *Portraits and Landscapes* to “have a very strong silence to them,” and that her raison d’être as a photographer is to “get people to really look at the image, and be helped by it.”

For the Turner Prize-winning artist Gillian Wearing, sitting for Opie helped her create a more honest portrait of herself. “She has a way of stopping the expected performance coming through from me,” she says.

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Born in Ohio in 1961, Opie rose to prominence in the mid-Nineties with her regal portrayals of close friends from Los Angeles' LGBTQ community, just as it was being decimated by AIDS. "I was really tired of seeing us being represented through body parts – a pierced nipple, a tattoo," she says. "There was never a whole representation of a person, just their 'queerness'."

It was around this time that Opie started frequenting the fabled insider spot Les Deux Café in Hollywood, which was owned by the designer Michèle Lamy (a subject in *Portraits and Landscapes*), and the two became friends. "In came this warm, fun, larger-than-life character who, after she had her son Oliver, would nonchalantly nurse him in the middle of the restaurant," Lamy remembers. She was already familiar with Opie's work, having attended her shows at the contemporary art gallery Regen Projects. "I lost many close friends to AIDS," she continues. "Cathy's work was so important because it brought to light the stories of people from the community that would have otherwise never

been told."

Opie has lived in Los Angeles since 1988, where she now shares a home with her partner Julie and Oliver (now 15). The practice she has developed over the decades is staggeringly diverse: from still lifes of Elizabeth Taylor's possessions and portraits of football players to grand panoramas of national parks and Tea Party gatherings. Next is *The Modernist*, a film comprising 842 stills, which will be released January 12. "Although I started making *The Modernist* before the election, it's a reaction to what's going on in America today," she says. "I'm horrified by the daily attack on democracy we are experiencing from the Trump administration. Democracy is what unites us – it is central to understanding and accepting each other." Opie's photographs may command stillness but, as has always been the case, they also demand progress.

Catherine Opie's Portraits and Landscapes will be at Thomas Dane Gallery from October 3 until November 18 2017; thomasdanegallery.com



Michele, 2017

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<http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/catherine-opie-exhibition-opening-london>

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