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Modernism and Dystopia: Catherine Opie Interviewed by
William J. Simmons
Portraiture as a form of mapping.



Catherine Opie, still from *The Modernist*, 2017. Single channel HD video with sound. 21:44 minutes. © Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

In thinking about how to introduce Catherine Opie's first film, *The Modernist* (2017), currently on view at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, I wanted to call it a love story, but I worried that this might sound diminishing. Love does not always imply rigor or erudition; rather, it denotes excessiveness and irrationality. And if *The Modernist* is anything, it is certainly rigorous, with its eight hundred still images combined into a twenty-two-minute film with dizzying precision. Compounding this detailed archival amassment are sophisticated references to the architectural history of Los Angeles, as well as to its filmic inspiration—Chris Marker's dystopic romance *La Jetée* (1962). *The Modernist* is not just a slide show, however. Opie presents the art-historical narrative she hopes to tell alongside a story of fear, longing, disappointment, and nostalgia. An artist (played by Opie's longtime collaborator Stosh, a.k.a.

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Pig Pen) turns to vandalism to assuage his passion for and anxious hatred of modernist architecture. Each photographic still caresses the protagonist and his environments with an unexpected tenderness. I sometimes imagine that we photograph people we love differently, or perhaps the photograph manifests this love formally in the chemical reactions that produce it. This is magic, which has always been the imaginary role of photography. It might be ahistorical for me to appeal to sentimentality, but in the case of *The Modernist*, one must dive into sentiment before any deconstruction or critique can occur.

—William J. Simmons



Catherine Opie. *The Modernist*. Installation view. Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

William J. Simmons I'd like to start with the reference in *The Modernist* to Chris Marker's essay-film *La Jetée*. What drew you to that work for your first foray into film?

Catherine Opie I actually thought of *The Modernist* in the '90s. It was just never the right time to do it. And it percolated for literally, like, twenty years. And *La Jetée* was a piece I always wanted to have a conversation with, specifically as a photographer. What is film in relationship to photography? Why do all filmmakers love photography so much? Chris Marker had an avid photography practice. Gus Van Sant makes photographs. There are a number of filmmakers who really love making images. And they make books, and they show their images.

But *La Jetée* is this very specific story because it also relates to when I was born. I was born in 1961. So, in a certain way, he is mapping out all of this fear in relation to Russia and America. Growing up and becoming conscious, so to speak, during the height of the Vietnam War, during the height of the Cold War, and the Nixon era, and everything from Kennedy to Nixon on is a period of time I feel is very formative in relationship to how I think about the world, and how I think about ideas of America and identity, and also citizenship, to a certain extent. So *La Jetée* hung out there as this beautiful, perfect piece a friend had introduced me to. Over the past few years, and especially when the presidential campaign was at its height, and the acts of vileness of speech, and also the invoking of the past as utopic, made me realize that the story I had in the back of my head for the last twenty years, that it was time to make it.

Where *La Jetée* looks at dystopia in relationship to the future, *The Modernist* looks at the idea of dystopia in terms of modernism being the utopic dream, but then its destruction. So, it's that layering of language, and that's why I call it a conversation with *La Jetée*. Because I'm not trying to remake *La Jetée*. I'm actually looking at the relationship to the past, and the future, and nostalgia, and also what happens in terms of Trump invoking this really weird Cold War rhetoric during his campaign. And so one of the things you don't see in *The Modernist* is a cell phone. You never see a

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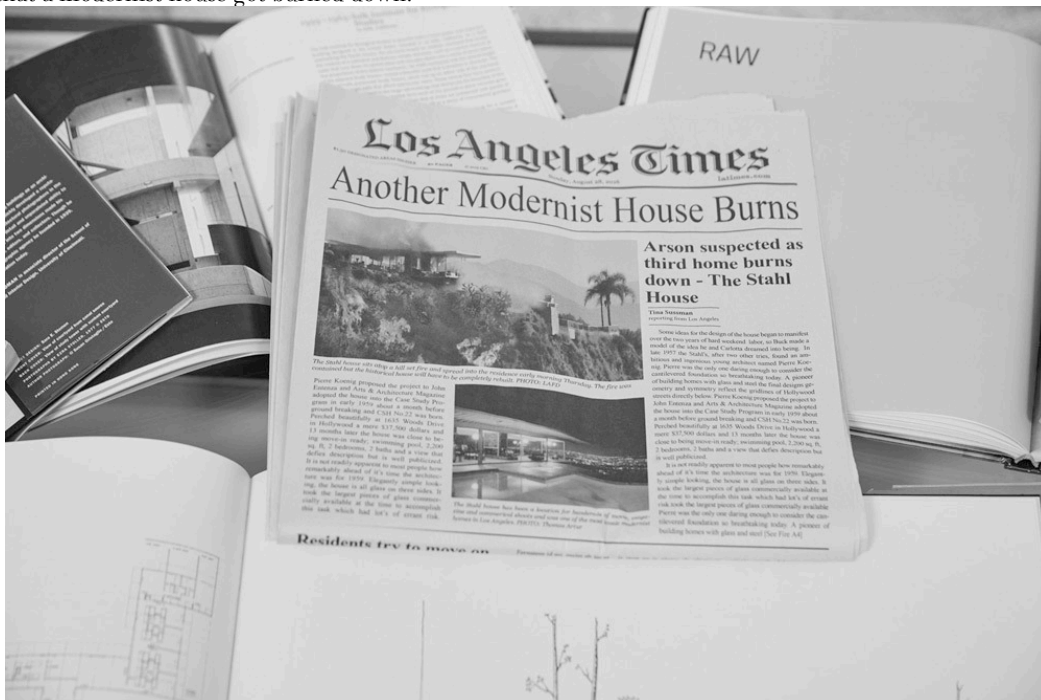
TV. You never see a computer. It's just as if you've gone back into the '60s, and it's the printed page again, while these days most news is obtained through our devices. But the daily paper still comes to my door in Los Angeles, and I'm very attached to the paper and the idea of what the paper contains, even though it keeps getting thinner, and thinner, and thinner.

WS There was an extra formal layer there too because you manipulated those *Los Angeles Times* covers, right?

CO I did. Yeah, they're fake news with real news. And that was before fake news became a thing, because I didn't know Trump was going to get elected. I was just having the feeling of the rhetoric of the campaign, and what it was doing to us as a nation.

WS Right. The newspapers become a tactile focal point of the film. It's an interesting kind of embodiment.

CO All the news is real, except for the ones about modernist houses. So we reprinted on newspaper print. My assistant, Heather, scanned the day's newspaper, and then we inserted our article into that newspaper. So each day that the paper comes, and it's the front page, there's a portion of it that's always the front-page news. We just happen to add that a modernist house got burned down.



Catherine Opie, still from *The Modernist*, 2017. Single channel HD video with sound. 21:44 minutes. © Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

WS I love the idea of *La Jetée* going forward, and you going backward. And what I thought was interesting while watching *La Jetée* was that there's a moment where past and present come together, when he discovers that he saw himself die. There's maybe not that kind of resolution in *The Modernist*.

CO No, the character was going to die. And I decided not to have the character die.

WS Why did you do that?

CO It would have been too much of a Hollywood trope to a certain extent. I wanted the character to be both the hero and the villain. And if the character gets killed off, then he's only a villain. There's some kind of resolution with

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death that destruction has ended. And I didn't want it to end on anything but the continuation of potential destruction. So you see that five houses have ended, and then it ends with the match being held over the words about change at the helm. That, to me, allowed it to also exist, which happens where you question whether or not this is all a dream, or this is real. Because the way that I'm using the reflective surface, and in the sleep cycle before he goes out to get the newspaper, is potentially: Is this just a dream? And I like the open-endedness of this because I've also had so many conversations where people ask: When are we going to wake up from this?

WS That's so important in political terms, too, because there's a liberal progressive sentiment that if Trump is gone, then everything will be okay again.

CO But it won't be for a really long time. Or, if ever. My son was born in 2002, right after 9/11. He's a child that has grown up with ongoing war overseas. And now he's going through the rest of high school with—unless Trump gets unseated—with Trump being the president. And so I also think a lot about my own child, and having to have these really deep conversations about dystopia with him because the pressure of what these kids feel in relationship to what the news cycle, social media, and everything that they're tied up in is completely different than me watching the nightly news in Ohio as a kid. Every night in Ohio after the nightly news, they would scroll all the troop names in Vietnam who had died, who were Ohio citizens, from the state of Ohio. And so every night I would watch the nightly news with my parents, and there would be this American flag waving on my black-and-white TV of these names of everybody who died because of the war. As a seven-year-old that image was implanted in my head, but it's so different now in terms of how information is gotten. So one of the other things about this piece is that there's only one source of information. It's the daily news. And what do we do with it? What does the language of that mean?

WS I think it's worth mentioning that the central narrative event in *La Jetée* is a very normative, melodramatic, clichéd, and heterosexual longing.

CO Absolutely.

WS But I didn't want to go into this interview saying, "Let's talk about gender!"

CO But the way that he longs for the woman he's lost is exactly my longing in terms of Pig Pen all these years. The two most photographed people in my life are Idexa and Pig Pen. And that's the other thing. You can't watch *The Modernist* and not realize this, which is why Pig Pen—Piggy is so sweet—said in response: Everybody knows how much you love me now.



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Catherine Opie, still from *The Modernist*, 2017. Single channel HD video with sound. 21:44 minutes. © Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

WS It really comes through in a powerful way. With art that deals with identity politics, there's always this push and pull between understanding it in a de-gendered state, a highly formalist method, or in a hyper-representational way. How does that emotional element run through the highly art-historical and formal elements of the film and the photographs?

CO That's an interesting question. It's hard because *Los Angeles Magazine* identified Stosh as a trans man, and that's not actually how Stosh identifies. And so identity is often summed up so simplistically. And I find that art is often summed up simplistically. I had an interview, and they asked: Is the character a performance artist? And I said: Actually, Pig Pen is a performance artist in his life, but, uh, no. You could think of it as a performative act in terms of burning these modernist houses down. But the complexities lie in all the language that we attribute to situations, or history, or news; or even when he's spraying the gasoline, he becomes Jackson Pollock to a certain extent. There's this action. So it's a narrative. It's a construct. But within that narrative construct, there are all these entry and exit points that you can take. You can talk about gender, you can talk about art history, you can talk about architecture, and modernism.

The joke is that after all of these years—thirty years—of making work, I've thrown everything into this piece. If you think about my years of photographing LA, and especially Beverly Hills and Bel Air houses, how I've kind of mapped-out the city, as well as mapped-out portraiture. In the last body of work of portraits on black with abstract landscapes, that was a way for me to breach that kind of portraiture and landscape. So, the piece is structurally in conversation with the format of portraiture. You walk into the building that Michael Maltzan designed on the inside, and the film becomes the landscape. You have the reflective building, and the way that modernism is also reflective, and that the whole film has all this idea of reflection. And do we think of reflection metaphorically? Or do we think of it physically? With *The Modernist* I'm just trying to hit all of these different questions that I ask myself as an artist, and begin to answer them within the complexities of a relatively simplistic narrative. The piece has a simplicity to it as well, and that's really important, because I think in order to get to the complexity, you can start taking those threads and breaking it down. But otherwise, it's got a beginning, it's got an end, but it's also a loop so you can enter it in the middle. It's good to watch it from beginning to end, but I'm not going to put a schedule on the outside of the gallery.

Catherine Opie: The Modernist is on view at Regen Projects in Los Angeles until February 17.

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<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/modernism-and-dystopia-catherine-opie-interviewed/>