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## How Teaching Made Catherine Opie a Great Listener



Portrait by Heather Rasmussen  
Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Catherine Opie is teaching an advanced photography workshop, "The Master Portrait," this week at Anderson Ranch Arts Center with Andrea Wallace.

The artist has been involved with the center for a few years. Founded in 1966, it hosts classes for aspiring and established artists alike, looking to hone or expand their skills in disciplines like new media, ceramics, painting, furniture making, printmaking, and more. Opie has herself taken part in ceramics workshops but this will be her first time officially teaching.

She is no stranger to the role of professor, however. Opie has taught at UCLA for 27 years where she's responsible for five classes a year, including the recent wonderfully named "Selfies, Self-Portraiture #WhatTheFuck."

Whitewall spoke with Opie just before she left for Aspen about what she's looking forward to this week and what teaching brings to her artistic practice.

**WHITEWALL:** How did you first get involved with Anderson Ranch?



Courtesy of Anderson Ranch Arts Center.

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

**CATHERINE OPIE:** For a long time I was just a verbal supporter. But then I went up and I made these ceramics that stumped everybody [laughs] and I really had a great week working there. It seems like every two or three years I end up back on the ranch. I think that it's one of the greatest places to spend time and it really is this wonderful community with great people working there.

**WW: Is a lot of it about trying out a medium that you haven't before? Like you mentioned working on ceramics...**

**CO:** I had been making those in LA. I really didn't know that much about ceramics, nor did I have the time to perfect it. So going up there allowed me the time to work and do an amazing class. And there are other classes I would love to take up there. I would love to do more furniture making, more sculpture, just out of curiosity.

Often artists don't have time in their lives to actually experiment. We try to experiment within our own wheelhouse. I certainly feel like I've done that with recent bodies work and making *The Modernist*. But I don't really think I give myself the time or the chance—because I wear too many hats already—to just fully learn a new skill.

**WW: What makes Anderson Ranch a comfortable place to try something new?**

**CO:** It fosters experimentation and community and it really is this place that's not like a residency, even though they have residencies. The setting is open. I love how everybody gathers in the evening to play a game of volleyball. When I go, I take my family. I like that it fosters that sense of community. I don't often feel like I can go to a place where I work but also have family time.



Courtesy of Anderson Ranch Arts Center.

**WW: What are you anticipating for the class next week, “The Master Portrait”?**

**CO:** It's quick. It's fast. I mean, it's a week. Basically I'm working right now at my desk pulling lectures together that encompass the idea around portraiture: creating a historical perspective of portraiture in relationship to documentation, experimentation, constructed portraits, formal portraits, and studio portraits. Every day I'll give a lecture looking at ideas around what portraits do and how they function. Then they have to make their own work and we critique the work.

It's not like anybody's going to come out with a fully new body of work in that period of time, but hopefully I can begin to create a dialogue with them in relation to their own practice and create a potential mentoring situation in that short week.

**WW: You've taught at UCLA for years. What do you like about teaching?**

**CO:** I've been teaching for 27 years. I think teaching is really amazing to do in relation to mentoring the next generation of artists. I have this huge belief in mentoring beyond your own ideas and your own practice. It allows me to really see what the younger people are thinking about, quite honestly. When I started teaching, I was in my late 20s and now I'm 57. That age gap is huge now.

I did a class at UCLA a few years ago called “Selfies, Self-Portraiture #WhatTheFuck.” So, it was like, okay, let's break it down. What is the difference between the history of self-portraiture in photography versus a selfie? How do we begin to look at this? And I would never begin to think about that unless I had to put a class together around that. So teaching allows me to expand and create dialogue around things that I'm already thinking about in relationship to my own practice.

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Courtesy of Anderson Ranch Arts Center.

**WW: What kind of advice are your students and mentees seeking at this moment?**

**CO:** We're living in incredibly difficult times and I think that a lot of my younger students right now are wondering, "What is this really about?"

When I went to school, I never thought that I'd have a gallery or I would sell a photograph or anything like that. That wasn't even in my wheelhouse, it was just because I was passionate and I loved making images and wanted to try to figure out how to actually make something meaningful out of what I was really drawn to do my whole life. I think the questions are much harder for students now because of the kind of global

economy and marketplace and the relationship to practice versus market. Art school is now becoming really expensive, as well. Fortunately, I work at a public university, which I'm really proud of. Most of our students get an enormous amount of assistance.

But I think the biggest question is, what is it that you're really trying to do in relationship to answering the questions in your mind about our society today? And does your work reflect upon that or not reflect upon that? And then to have perseverance and trust within your own ideas while continuing to flourish and research those things that are interesting to you. That's the best advice you can give—to ignore the outside voices and have trust within yourself.

Because I think everybody, as well as myself, gets so concerned. When I was a young artist and all of a sudden the first place that Pervert ever showed was the Whitney Biennial, that scared the shit out of me. That was really frickin' public. But you have to trust that what you're doing is important enough to you as a person that you also will perhaps influence the public in relationship to your ideas.

And first and foremost, it's about your relationship to your work. I teach people to be creative people, whether or not they're going to end up being artists for the rest of their lives. It's about that kind of discourse around creativity and exploring their ideas and criticism and what purpose criticism serves in relation to a larger ability of communication.

What teaching has done for me the most as a person is it's trained me to be a great listener. When you're involved in the classroom and when you're involving ideas that are very personal, it also allows people to be very great listeners. And I think that we've lost that a little bit at this period of time, in which people just throw out whatever kind of comments in relationship to social media without deeper regard to the criticality and kind of intellectualism that goes into a practice. I think listening is a good thing.

<https://www.whitewall.art/art/teaching-made-catherine-opie-great-listener>