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PROFILES

SECRET SELVES

Catherine Opie's photographs expose hidden truths about people and places.

BY ARIEL LEVY

In the course of a thirty-year career, the photographer Catherine Opie has made a study of the freeways of Los Angeles, lesbian families, surfers, Tea Party gatherings, America's national parks, the houses of Beverly Hills, teen-age football players, the personal effects of Elizabeth Taylor, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, Boy Scouts, her friends, minimalls, and tree stumps. But her most famous photographs are probably two that she took of herself, early in her working life. In "Self-Portrait/Cutting," which Opie made in 1993, when she was thirty-two years old, she stands shirtless with her back to the camera in front of an emerald-green tapestry, which offsets her pale skin and the rivulets of blood emerging from an image carved into her back with a scalpel: a childlike scene of a house, a cloud, and a pair of smiling, skirt-wearing stick figures. In "Self-Portrait/Pervert," made the following year, Opie is faceless and topless and bleeding again: she sits in front of a black-and-gold brocade with her hands folded in her lap, her head sealed in an ominous black leather hood, the word "pervert" carved in oozing, ornate letters across her chest.

They are unnerving images—"'Pervert' is too intense for me now," Opie told me recently—and they had a particularly jarring effect at the time she made them. When the photographs were exhibited at the Whitney Biennial, in 1995, they were "like shock troops crashing a mannerly art-world party," the critic Holland Cotter wrote in the *Times*. Among other things, "Pervert" was a fierce response to Jesse Helms and his allies in Congress who campaigned against funding AIDS research. (The disease, Helms reasoned, was the consequence of "deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct.") It was also a statement to the gay community, which Opie saw as chasing respectability at the expense of sexual radicals like her and her friends, who were avid practitioners of sadomasochism. "The leather community was really disowned," Opie said. "The homophobia in relation to AIDS was so deep. People who weren't in the leather community were, like, 'Well, *they're* perverts.'" But, above all, the two self-portraits were pictures of Opie's secret selves. It was as if her invisible desires were exposed by the camera, her most intimate means of communication since childhood.

Really, what Opie liked best about transgressive sex was the way it created a feeling of family. "S/M was all about community for me," she said one afternoon, sitting in her sunny kitchen in Los Angeles, with its gleaming stainless-steel stove and Heath-tile backsplash. On a bench by the window was a pillow with a needlepoint inscription that read, "Grandmothers are a special part of all that's cherished in the heart." Opie, who is fifty-five, smiled wistfully when she recalled that era: "You dress up with your friends; you do things together in the dungeons." At the time, she was taking photographs of her cohort, with their tattoos and piercings, in formal compositions and vibrant colors that evoked the Renaissance paintings of Hans Holbein. Opie felt that she was creating a portrait gallery of her own "royal family." There was something not just regal but disarmingly heartfelt in those pictures. As the Los Angeles art critic David Pagel put it, in 1994, "The strangest and most telling quality that Opie manages to smuggle into her images of aggressive misfits is a sense of wholesomeness."

Opie grew up in the Midwest. She was going to be a kindergarten teacher before she became a photographer. She always wanted to be a mother. "'Self-Portrait/Cutting' was about longing," Shaun Caley Regen, Opie's gallerist since 1993, told me. "It was about an unattainable ideal—two women, a house, whatever it was she felt she couldn't have—cut into her back."

In the intervening decades, Opie has moved from marginal radical to establishment fixture. In 2008, the Guggenheim devoted four floors to "Catherine Opie: American Photographer," a major mid-career retrospective that attracted some three thousand people a day. Several luminous shots that Opie took of Lake Michigan hung in the Obama White House. Opie is a tenured professor at U.C.L.A., and sits on the boards of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Andy Warhol Foundation. She earns more than a million dollars in a good year. Recently, when the Smithsonian Archives of American Art gave Opie a medal at a gala on the Upper East Side, the host noted that it was his first opportunity to honor a pillar of the "'Los Angeles leather-dyke community.'"

Opie is so prominent in the Southern California art world that friends call her "the mayor of Los Angeles," but her photographs have remained quietly subversive. "Often, in my work, I think about what's iconic—and what is the way to reimage something that's iconic," Opie said. Surfers don't surf in her photographs: they wait for waves, a motionless line of silhouettes in a smoky sea. Freeways are empty of cars, because Opie shoots them at dawn on Sundays, when they become something architectural and still, as elegiac as the Pyramids of Giza in the nineteenth-century photographs of Maxime Du Camp. For a portrait of Diana Nyad, who, at sixty-four, became the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida, Opie photographed her naked, from behind, showing the ghostly white flesh that had been

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In Opie's "Self-Portrait/Nursing," her chest bears the scar of an inscription from her days as an S/M practitioner: "Pervert."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATHERINE OPIE

covered by her bathing suit, offset by the leathery brown of the rest of her body. Nyad's skin had become a kind of photogram, marked by her quest, and in Opie's portrait one sees both the heroine who managed an unfathomable feat and the vulnerable geriatric who nearly died in the process.

It is as if Opie were able to photograph aspects of people and mini-malls and Yosemite Falls that are invisible to the rest of the world. Her pictures ask how sure we are about what we know to be true. "There's a certain kind of equality I'm trying to create, which is what I believe American democracy is about," Opie said. "If I were to pass judgment on, say, football players—that they were the asshole kids who used to beat me up in high school—that's not really *looking*."

Several months before Elizabeth Taylor died, in 2011, Opie started going to her house in Bel Air to photograph her possessions and private spaces: her vanity table, set with Lucite containers of carefully organized eyeshadow; her sitting room, with its blue velvet sofas. The two never met—they were connected through a mutual accountant—but Taylor was often home while Opie was shooting. "One time, she called her private assistant, and he ran up and told me, 'Elizabeth would really like those Christmas decorations photographed,' " Opie said. "Then she peeked at me through the curtains."

Opie told me this sitting on the floor of the archive room in a five-thousand-square-foot space in the Brewery Arts Complex, in downtown L.A., where she had recently moved her studio. She was wearing jeans, sneakers, and an olive-green polo shirt that left visible the tattoo on her substantial forearm as she paged through a binder marked "700 Nimes Road," Taylor's address and the title of Opie's show of the work last year at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. One image depicted a stack of worn red Cartier boxes in front of a silver-framed photograph of Taylor and Richard Burton. Another showed the silky sleeves of Taylor's bathrobes, in lavender and pale gray. The pictures were so intimate that you could almost smell them. "Because she's such an iconic movie star, if you lost the personal—or the person!—then you'd just feel like you were flipping through *Architectural Digest*," Opie said.

William Eggleston's photographs of Graceland—a portrait of Elvis through his artifacts—were an inspiration for the Taylor portfolio, and the pictures share a feeling of haunted stillness. They add up to a life, however glamorous, that has evaporated. Taylor died unexpectedly during Opie's project. "It became this last document," Opie said, "so my editing had to carry a certain kind of reverence: This is it. This is the sum."

Scrolling through images on her computer, Opie said, "Same thing happened with 9/11." By chance, she had been photographing Wall Street a few weeks before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Suddenly, the pictures—understated black-and-white images of the labyrinth of the financial district, without a human being or a moving vehicle in sight—had a different meaning. Opie pulled up a photograph in which the Twin Towers are visible in the background. "They look like ghost buildings," she said.

She flipped to an image of the Cocoa Exchange Building, with its Flatiron-like curve, flanked by parked vehicles on Pearl and Beaver Streets. "This could very easily be a Berenice Abbott photograph—except for the cars," Opie said, and smiled. "The history of photography is full of those signifiers. And I love that kind of shit." There is almost no sky in any of the pictures; Opie shot them all from the viewpoint of a pedestrian looking forward. "New York is often photographed vertically, so to create this kind of Western landscape of the city, through the horizontal panorama, is another way of debunking an icon."

Opie's drive to memorialize the past—or the present as it slips into history—is offset by a desire to explode convention: she is a nostalgic

renegade. (Even her speech is a mixture of the rebellious and the homey. She has the slightly lazy sound of a pot-smoking California beach dude, but with Midwestern vowels, as open and flat as cornfields.) For the past year, she has been making a film, composed of still photographs, that combines her impulses: a reimagining of the sixties-era French art film "La Jetée," which tells the story of a post-nuclear future in Paris. Opie's film, "The Modernist," is about an arsonist who is obsessed with L.A.'s landmark mid-century houses, and, driven to madness by their unattainability, starts methodically burning them down.

Opie got the idea for the film in the nineties, but, as often happens with her projects, it took on a new significance for her as she made it, with the election of a President who'd promised to return America to the halcyon days before feminism, globalism, and multiculturalism. " 'La Jetée' was about the future," Opie said. " 'The Modernist' is about nostalgia. The story is about a longing for the past that we can't obtain."

Until Opie was thirteen, her family lived in Sandusky, Ohio. She spent her childhood "having sleepovers in people's back yards in tents," she said, "like real Norman fucking Rockwell." Her mother was a gym teacher who became a housewife after she had children; her father, who died four years ago, ran OP Craft, his family's art-supply company. He was a Republican, and had one of the country's preëminent collections of political memorabilia. (One of Opie's favorite artifacts from her inheritance is a commemorative ribbon made after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, whose likeness is embroidered on it in tiny stitches below the American flag, with the quotation "I have said nothing but what I am willing to live by, and if it be the pleasure of almighty God, to die by.") Opie's most vivid memories are of time spent outdoors. "We would roam the woods and the creeks by ourselves," she said. "All summer long, we'd be on our bikes, riding to the candy store."

Opie's parents bought her a starter camera when she was in fourth grade, after she did a book report on Lewis Hine, who took startling portraits of child laborers across America and of immigrants coming in through Ellis Island. "He made the first photographs that actually created a change in laws and policies, and I just realized how important photography really is," Opie said. "It was a real time of pictorialism in terms of magazines—you had *Life*, you had *Look*, you had *National Geographic*. So, in the same way you have kids looking at Instagram, there were always magazines around our house." She took pictures of her parents, her block, her friends at the country club, her Barbie dolls. "I've pretty much been doing the same thing since I was nine," she said. "I was making portraits of my friends. I was making self-portraits, I was making images of the neighborhood." She was, as she likes to say, "mapping" her reality.

Or some of it. Her father was violent with her older brother—"brutalized him," Opie said—and her brother, in turn, was violent with her. Her mother had an affair with a family friend, at her father's behest. "Dad set it up because he wanted to be a swinger!" Opie told me. "But then she really fell in love. Mom was thinking of running away with him. *He* was probably just a dude having a good time." Then her father told the family that he had cancer. "He went to the Cleveland Clinic—but always by himself, never with my mom—and the doctors told him to move to a warmer climate," Opie said. "How much of that is true is a subject of debate in my family. I think what happened was my grandfather sold the company out from under him."

Whatever the reason, when Opie was thirteen her family moved to California, to a suburb of San Diego called Poway. At the new house, Opie set up a darkroom in a spare bathroom, and, by babysitting for the family next door, saved enough to buy a 35-mm. camera. "I kind of made friends by taking pictures," she said. "I went to the high-school plays and started taking photographs. I fell in love with this one woman—I had a *major* crush on her at a time when you didn't tell anybody that—and I would print out the pictures and give them to her and we became best friends."

When Opie was sixteen, her parents divorced. "Dad drove my mom to a condo and said, 'This is where you're gonna live. I'm keeping the house and the kids,' " she told me. "Then my dad remarried immediately—he married this crazy woman, and my brother protected me from her in really nice ways. Like, he put a lock on my bedroom door when he realized she was crazy." Her brother left to join the Air Force, and her father—less than a year into his second marriage—started having an affair with Opie's mother, over at the condo. "It's like a soap opera, I know," she said. "The whole idea of the family unit was just totally chaotic and completely messed up for me."

Yet Opie was reluctant to leave home. For two years after graduating from high school, she took classes at a community college, and worked at a camera store and as an outdoor-education counsellor. Eventually, she decided to become a teacher. "I knew I was really good with kids," she said. "And I liked kids a lot." At twenty, Opie left to study early-childhood education at Virginia Intermont College, a former women's school that had recently gone coed. She began taking photography classes. "They were actually really dedicated artists, some of those professors," she said. "For the first time in my entire life, I made it onto the dean's list." Opie believes that she might well have stayed in Virginia as a kindergarten teacher—"I think I would've ended up spending my whole life sitting on small chairs," she said—if not for the intervention of a painter named Eleanor, who had been her father's high-school girlfriend. "After my parents broke up the second time, she came out to California," Opie said. "I'd broken my leg, and she painted this beautiful beach scene on my cast. Eleanor was an artist. She was from Sandusky, Ohio. She was just family right away—I knew what she was about." During a college vacation, Opie visited Eleanor in New York City, and the two went out to photograph together. "She said, 'You really are an artist. You've been doing

this your whole life. You need to go to a major city and find an art school.' And it just felt like the truth."

In 1982, Opie moved back to California to attend the San Francisco Art Institute, with help from her mother, who took out a loan on her car to pay the tuition. Suddenly, she found herself surrounded by artists and feminists and homosexuals: her people. "You're reading Kafka for the first time, you're understanding Engels—all of that besides the coming out." (Opie told her father that she was gay before she told her mother, knowing that he would be more open to it. "I think he kind of liked the idea of fantasizing about his daughter with women," she said. "He was a bit of a perv, my dad.") She began frequenting Amelia's, a lesbian bar in the Mission district. "There was a leather-dyke scene there, and I found them kind of hot—like, 'Whoa, they seem dangerous.' " She was attracted to those women, but, even more, she wanted to learn from them. To Opie, "They were the leading thinkers of this revolution around women's bodies. Like, the San Francisco Take Back the Night marches weren't a bunch of hand-holding women—they were radicals *taking* back the night."

Opie began contributing photographs to the lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs*. (The title was a riposte to the anti-pornography feminist journal *Off Our Backs*.) She joined a women's S/M society called the Outcasts, co-founded by Gayle Rubin, an activist and academic. "She stood out," Rubin said. "She was a student then, and she had a kind of alertness that was evident—she seemed unusually observant." If her desires had been unspoken, now they were something to organize a social life around: the personal was not just political; it was communal. But, Opie said, "S/M was never sexual for me." It was something she did much more with friends than with lovers. The scariest and most violent secret impulses could be followed and validated, made almost cozy, in an atmosphere where you could always say no. "I just needed to push myself to get over an enormous amount of fear I had around my body," she said.

It was the era of the feminist movement's acrimonious "sex wars," during which the anti-porn faction—Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Robin Morgan, Gloria Steinem—battled with "pro-sex" feminists and S/M enthusiasts like Rubin, who believed they were broadening the boundaries of female power and eroticism. ("To our bewilderment, some women identified their sexuality with the S/M pictures we found degrading," the feminist Susan Brownmiller, a founder of the group Women Against Pornography, wrote. "They claimed we were condemning their minds and behavior, and I guess we were.") Opie and her friends discussed these issues passionately. "I was learning all this great shit from feminism," she said. "We talked in great detail about Dworkin. It wasn't just about going to a dungeon and playing. It was going to a dungeon and having philosophical conversations."

Here are some things to expect the next time you attend a four-hour art-school crit: Unrestrained use of words like "ontological." Laconic murmuring. Androgyny. Dandruff. On the last day of Opie's fall "Americana" class for U.C.L.A. undergraduates, fifteen Studio Art majors consumed the cookies that Opie had brought from Whole Foods, and then inspected one another's work. Their photographs were mounted in several rooms in the Broad Art Center, which is surrounded by towering pines and sculptures by Richard Serra, Matisse, and Rodin. One student presented a moody, grainy image of sprinkler droplets whirling through the sky above blades of grass. "They look like they're disrupting the environment—even the paper itself," a young man in an orange sweatshirt said. "I think your images have a lot of phenomenological availability, and I am really in admiration."

The next picture—a shot of the sea with a landmass in the background, taken from the window of an airplane—was received with less enthusiasm. People accused the photographer, a young man with dirty, bleached hair wearing a sweatshirt that said "Violent Femme," of following the mores of Instagram.

Another student, defending him, asked, "Wait, does every square now mean Instagram?"

"It shouldn't, it shouldn't," Opie told them, shaking her head emphatically. "The square came before Instagram—it's called Hasselblad!" (In her own work, Opie eschewed the square for years, to avoid invoking Robert Mapplethorpe, her predecessor in exalting erotic deviance through photography.)

Opie had got up at three that morning—"I've never been a sleeper"—but she did not seem tired or impatient or bored. She seemed, as she almost always does, mellow, avuncular, benevolent, curious, and simultaneously earnest and amused. (She sometimes takes a cigarette break with her students. "I only do this when I'm here," she said, savoring an American Spirit. "You never really leave art school.") She told them, "I still get pleasure out of looking at an image like this—I like this image in terms of surface." There was perfect clarity on the rippling waves in the photograph.

A young woman dressed all in black, with an iPhone tucked into her waistband, wasn't having it. "I don't know," she said, agitated. "Desire, pleasure, *landscape* to someone like me signifies the backbone of colonialism."

The platinum-haired photographer sat on the floor against the wall, dejected. "Let's hear from you," Opie said to him.

"Damned if I do, damned if I don't," he mumbled.

"Stand up for your work!" Opie urged. Her tone was insistent but collegial. "Open it up! Don't shut it down, man."

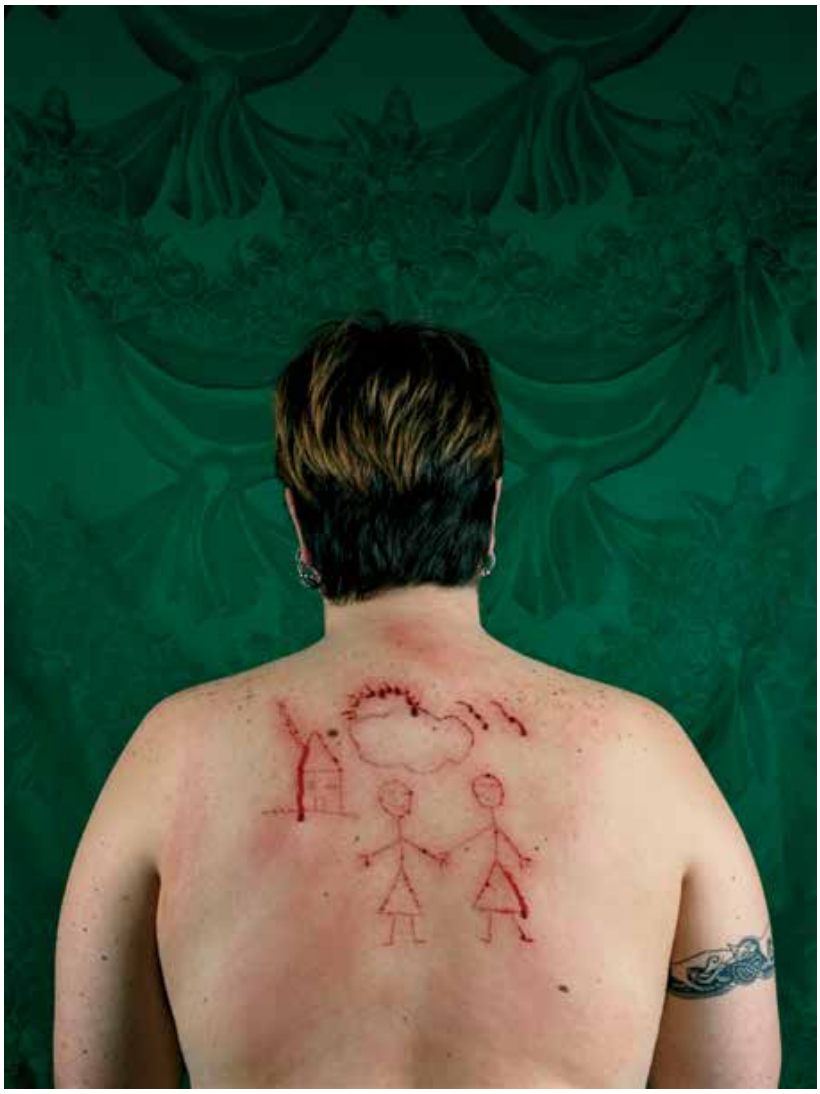
The student shrugged and said, "I guess I was just interested in trying to take some pictures."

The class turned its attention to a young woman who looked like Audrey Hepburn, with a hoop piercing the cartilage between her nostrils. Her work depicted members of her family but looked like war photography, with children playing or crying around abandoned buildings that evoked bombed-out rubble. "I'm really over it," she said. "I'm at this point where I don't even know how to make photos. They're just falling apart."

"That's when you dig deeper," Opie said slowly, but with excitement. "It's actually a good place to be in, having something fall apart."

In her own development as a young artist, Opie felt her world dissolve a year after graduation, when she left San Francisco to pursue an M.F.A. at the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia. The transition, she said, "sucked." She was lonely, and felt that her nascent sexual powers had been rescinded. "It was, like, there is not gonna be one person who's gonna go out with me down here," she said. "It's just never going to happen." She had found a home and a chosen family in San Francisco, and in Valencia she felt displaced, turned around. "It was like some kind of time warp where I go back to the suburbs I came out of," she continued. "And I didn't have a car." Stuck in place, she started photographing a planned community that was being built across the road from her apartment. Her thesis portfolio, "Master Plan," featured photographs of matching model homes, plots of land, and billboards advertising an America where the children are apple-cheeked and towheaded and the parents are as straight as Ken and Barbie.

But the pictures don't seem snide or dismissive. It was as if Opie had taken the feelings from her own suburban childhood—loneliness, tenderness, yearning, claustrophobia—and distributed them across the tract houses of Valencia. It was the first of many photographic investigations of the topic that probably fascinates Opie most: community.



An image of domestic life expressed unresolved longing, Opie's gallerist said.

In the archive room, Opie showed me an image, from 1993, of an old friend of hers, who goes by Pig Pen: she is young and very thin and looks tough and a little tired sitting on a stool in a white tank top. Opie pointed to the tattoos of jack-o'-lanterns—one happy, one sad—on Pig Pen's knees. "I love the pumpkins," she said. "I hate to use the word 'muse,' but I have a certain obsession with Piggy. I *love* looking at Pig Pen—never get tired of looking at Pig Pen."

Opie's first solo show, in 1991, was mostly closeup photographs of Pig Pen and other friends of hers, wearing fake mustaches and beards, looking rebellious and confrontational, gleaming against golden backgrounds. They were portraits of her subjects' macho alter egos: each was exhibited with a plaque engraved with the character's nickname ("Papa Bear," "Chief," "Wolfe"). The title of that show, "Being and Having," was a play on Jacques Lacan's idea that men *have* the phallus, while women, as the embodiment of erotic desire in art, *are* the phallus. (Opie was dating an academic at the time.) Not long after the show, *Artforum* published an interview with the queer theorist Judith Butler, who argued that gender is always a performance, and used Opie's photographs as a kind of illustration of the idea. Like Butler's thesis, these images have migrated toward the mainstream; two decades after they were taken, several of them were used to accompany the opening credits of the lesbian drama "The L Word."

Opie met Pig Pen and the rest of the "Being and Having" crew soon after she finished graduate work at CalArts and moved to Los Angeles. "It was just like in high school—I started taking photos of this community and then we were sort of friends and then we became better friends," Opie said. "It was like I was always there—*There's Cathy and her camera*." She laughed. "I was never as cool as they were. They were hotter. They definitely got more girls than I ever did. They rode a motorcycle better than I

did. I always felt like this suburban nerd in this groovy crowd that broke all the boundaries."

Though Opie would come to feel deeply enmeshed in that rebellious group, she still had the longings that are purported to be the most conventionally female: she wanted a nuclear family, not just a royal family. "I've never really had a successful domestic relationship," Opie told an interviewer in those years. "I've always wanted one."

In 1998, Opie went on a road trip to photograph lesbian families—women who'd had children, who lived in groups, in couples, in North Carolina and Oklahoma and New York City—for a portfolio that she called "Domestic." She ended up criss-crossing the country in an RV for three months. "I was travelling around trying to figure out what it was all about," she said.

Opie was stumbling toward her own domestic future. In the fall of 1999, she was awarded a fellowship at Washington University, in St. Louis, Missouri. In the two months that she spent there, she became friends with a professor of painting named Julie Burleigh, a single mother from a prominent family in small-town Louisiana. They had just begun to grow close when Opie accepted a job offer from Yale, and moved to New York City. Her life was changing rapidly: she'd decided that she didn't want to wait any longer to become a mother. "A number of my butch friends were shocked that I was going to get pregnant and have a baby—like, 'How can you do that?' " Opie recalled. "I was, like, why can't I be butch and have a baby? Why can't I acknowledge the fact that I'm a biological woman and I have a vagina that can do shit?" She tried five times to get pregnant, using her friend Rodney's sperm and a turkey baster. "Different dykes would come by the loft, and Rodney would come over and look at gay male porn magazines—then they'd take it in to me in a Russel Wright teacup."

Meanwhile, through phone calls and visits, Opie was intensifying her relationship with Burleigh, who had never been involved with a woman before, and who had just finished bringing up a daughter, whom she'd had when she was eighteen. "She wasn't planning on having another kid," Opie said. "Julie had *just* gotten through it. But she fell in love with me—and she probably thought, Oh, she's forty, she'll never get pregnant." Eventually, Opie realized that intrauterine insemination was covered by her health insurance at Yale: she got pregnant on the first try.

In the midst of her pregnancy, Opie was recruited to teach at U.C.L.A. She returned to Los Angeles in 2001, a month before she gave birth to her son, Oliver, and settled in a house in West Adams. "Julie didn't move in till Oliver was three months old, so I was there alone in this big house," Opie said. "I had a nanny, and I would pump in my office. I'd teach, and then I'd go home to him." About a year later, Opie made "Self-Portrait/Nursing," which is now in the Guggenheim's permanent collection. She is topless again in that picture, but for the first time she shows her face to the camera. Holding her son in her tattooed arms, she gazes down into his eyes as he nurses—a butch-dyke

BRANCA

Ralph Branca was the fifteenth of seventeen children.
This poem is not the poem of "the speaker."

His father was an immigrant from Calabria.
These words are those of Robert Pinsky. Speaking.

Branca wore Dodger uniform number 13.
"Speaking" is the punch line of a Jewish joke.

Some Romans call Calabrians "Africani."
Brooklyn had its own daily, the Brooklyn *Eagle*.

At eighty-five Branca learned about his mother.
He was twenty-one when Robinson joined the Dodgers.

At eleven, I loved Robinson for his daring
Running the bases. Stealing home. His fire.

Branca was one of the few who befriended him.
I was too young to understand his mission,

The fuel of that dancing to taunt the pitcher.
Robinson never forgot Branca's kindness.

What the old man found out about his mother
Is she was born a Jew in Hungary: Kati.

After he gave up the most famous home run ever,
Back in the clubhouse Branca lay weeping, face down.

Kati gave birth to seventeen Catholic children.
The Giants won the pennant. 1951.

Branca means "claw," a fit name for a pitcher.
His teammates thought it best that he cry alone,

But "Only my dear friend Jackie, who knew me so well,
Came over and put his arm around my shoulder."

The Nazis killed the aunts and uncles Branca
Didn't know existed until he was old.

42: in itself, a nothing of a number.
The Dodgers traded Branca to the Tigers.

Grief: with its countless different ways and strains.
Glory: a greater thing than success, but slower.

Some of the Tigers who had been Giants explained
To Branca how the Giants had stolen the signs

From opposition catchers: The telescope
In center field. Wires, buzzers. Branca chose not

To talk about it. It's all in Prager's book:
His research unearthed Kati, those aunts and uncles.

The Dodgers were taken from Brooklyn by their owner:
I, Robert Pinsky, choose not to say his name.

I didn't live in Brooklyn, but I knew the score.
I knew it was a kind of underdog place.

Nowadays once a year all Major Leaguers
Wear Jackie Robinson's number, 42.

In the joke, the person who answers the telephone
At Goldberg, Goldberg, and Goldberg keeps replying

That Goldberg is out of the office. And so is Goldberg.
"Well, all right, let me talk to Goldberg." "Speaking."

Robinson spoke to Branca: "If not for you,"
He said, "We never would have made it this far."

—Robert Pinsky

Madonna and Child. If you look closely, you can see the raised white scars across her chest, indelibly looping into the word "pervert."

The new federal courthouse in downtown Los Angeles was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill to look like a floating glass cube: solid and clean—as the law ought to be—and suspended above the pedestrian flow of everyday life. Inside, sunlight pours down through a ten-story atrium of pale marble, flanked by dozens of courtrooms. Sky bridges cross through the space, and from each one visitors are confronted with the sight of the massive piece that Opie made for the building, "Yosemite Falls."

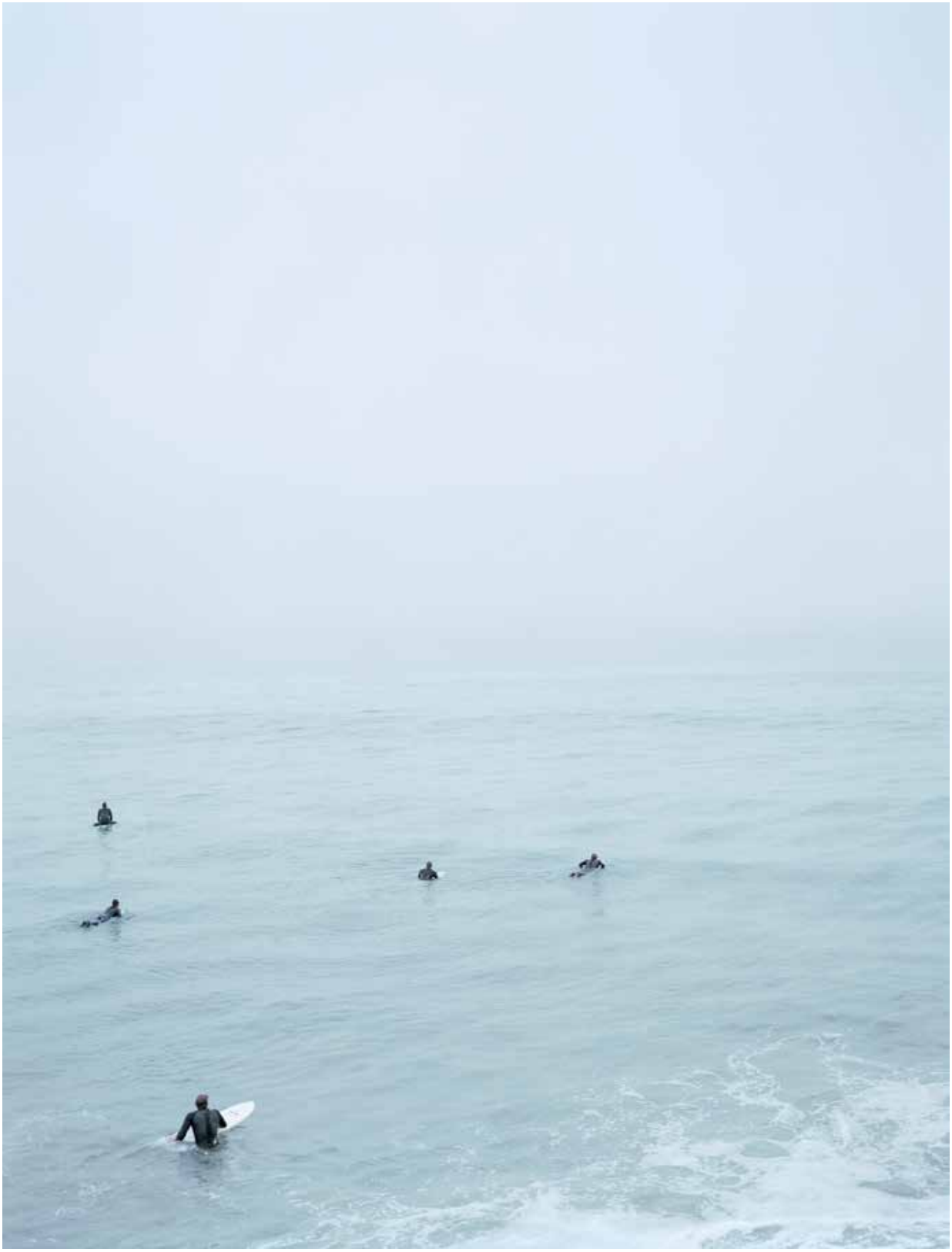
Six tremendous panels—five hundred pounds apiece, installed with a crane—depict the highest waterfall in Yosemite National Park. Each photograph hangs on a separate floor, but from certain vantage points they all seem to cascade together. "You can traverse the whole building like you traverse the landscape," Opie said, as she moved from bridge to bridge one recent afternoon. She conceived "Yosemite Falls" while the building was still under construction. "They showed me the architectural plan, and it was all studs when I first visited," she said. "I designed it off of photographs from the Internet, and then I went to Yosemite and made the piece." She shot from a bridge, which allowed her to capture all the perspectives represented in the building. "It was, like, how do you take something like Yosemite Falls and de-cliché it?" The top three panels follow the rushing water as it seems to pour from the sky and toward the river basin, and the lower three present the falls' reflection in the water collected at the bottom. Opie thought of the piece as a metaphor for the scales of justice: an image and its mirror, hanging in balance.

We went down to the floor where the picture of the river hangs. "This is a really sweet view," Opie said, looking at the dark forest around the base of the falls. She motioned toward the shadows, where you could see river plants through the reflection on the surface, and smooth black and gray pebbles below. "This becomes magical, like a Monet, almost." Most people wouldn't think of the river as Yosemite Falls, she pointed out, but in her mind it always served as the midpoint, the fulcrum of the scales: "Below it, it's either the abyss or the reflection." Looking around at the courtrooms, she said, "This is when one's life is turned upside down—when gravity changes."

Opie liked the idea that people who might not go to museums could have an experience of art, at a moment in their lives when they might badly need an encounter with the sublime. "I want to do more buildings now!" she said. "I love architecture. I love working with architects and figuring out, What's something that could be iconic and live in the life of the building? This is gonna stay here forever." Even when the building was empty, Opie had given it an inner life.

The dream of lesbian domesticity that once seemed out of reach—that she once had cut into her back—is now Opie's reality. She lives with Burleigh in a handsome,

REGEN PROJECTS



Opie's work subverts expectations. In her photographs, surfers don't surf: they wait for waves.

spacious house in Hancock Park, with chickens and rabbits in a coop in the back yard. Oliver, who recently turned fifteen, attends a progressive private school, where he has classmates named Aristotle and Theory; three years ago, Burleigh's daughter gave birth to a son, whom she brings to visit every Sunday.

Burleigh is wiry and lean where Opie is hefty and solid. Because Burleigh has longer hair and occasionally wears a dress—as she did at their wedding, in Mexico, three years ago—it is tempting to think of her as the more feminine of the two, but they don't see it that way. "Cathy calls me her husband, because I'm taller," Burleigh told me. "Or because she feels like I'm the final word on stuff."

"Indian or Thai?" Opie asked one recent evening, as they were getting ready to order dinner.

"Indian," Burleigh replied firmly, and ordered for Opie and their guests: Pig Pen, who had arrived that morning from Mill Valley, and their friend Steak, who was the subject of an early photograph that the Museum of Modern Art bought not long ago. In it, Steak faces away from the camera, her red hair buzzed short, with the word "dyke" tattooed across the back of her neck. "Ye Olde Dyke Tattoo," Steak said, turning around to show it off. She shrugged. "At the time, it was a bold statement."

Opie's photographs of her friends over the years are their own kind of historical record. The subjects age and transform, their piercings multiply or disappear, their flesh goes from taut and unmarked to weathered and increasingly crowded with tattoos. In her studio, Opie had shown me an image from 2009 of Pig Pen looking soulful and handsome, gazing away from the camera, shirtless, the scars of a double mastectomy faintly visible below each nipple, the word "ambiguous" in graffiti-like scrawl next to a large tattoo of a beating heart. "Piggy did chest surgery but didn't do hormones—that's a menopause mustache," Opie said reverently, and touched her own not insubstantial whiskers. "We've always had mustache contests. But Pig's right now is really fucking good."

Pig Pen was visiting to star in "The Modernist," but usually works as a scenic artist for Restoration Hardware, and does "durational performance art" with a partner, Julie Tolentino. "We do a six-hour piece where I feed her fifty pounds of honey from the top of a hunting tripod," Pig Pen said. "It's an interesting position, because it's pretty dangerous, and a lot of people see it as a male dominating a female."

After the food arrived, Oliver joined the group at the kitchen table, and listened to them talk about the old days, when Opie lived in a building that they called Casa de Estrogen and they frequented a place named Club Fuck. "All these West Hollywood people started coming," Pig Pen recalled, smiling. "And that's when everybody started getting gay bashed—because they were walking half nude through Latino family neighborhoods to go to the gay bar. I mean, have a little common sense! Just a *little*. Our crew would go to a club and *then* take off our trenchcoats and be in the gear."

A woman named Sweet Pea, who worked the door at the club, went on to become a fashion designer. "You watched Sweet Pea on 'Project Runway,' Oliver!" Opie said. "Remember?"

"Not her first season but her all-star season," Oliver, who is blond and tall and gentle, replied.

His mother returned to the topic of the friends' youthful clubbing: "Butch was really not something that was accepted in L.A., and we had each other and that was it."

"We'd go to the lesbian bars," Pig Pen said, "and we'd get turned away!" They all laughed at the memory.

"May I be excused?" Oliver asked. "I have homework."

Opie nodded and resumed the conversation. "There are members of the old crew that call me up and are, like, 'I messed up the pictures you took of me. Can you print me another one?' It's, like, no, that paper doesn't even exist anymore!" Replacing the portraits would be a substantial gift. "I get paid *fifty thousand dollars* to take someone's picture," Opie said, cackling and pounding the table with her fist. Her friends were laughing deliriously. "Isn't that hilarious?"

"I think I put thumbtacks through mine," Pig Pen said.

The next afternoon, Opie, her assistant, Heather Rasmussen, and Pig Pen wound through the Hollywood Hills in Opie's BMW hybrid, heading to the Chemosphere—"the most modern home built in the world," according to an Encyclopædia Britannica entry from 1961. The octagonal house, designed by John Lautner, an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright's, hovers like a flying saucer amid the treetops, perched on a thirty-foot concrete column that emerged from a sharp slope studded with jade plants and cacti. They ascended by funicular with the house's owner Lauren Taschen, an art consultant and collector who is married to the publisher Benedikt Taschen. "This view was in the movie 'Body Double,'" Taschen, who was wearing a cape of a sweater and a hulking diamond ring, said. Pig Pen and Opie were giddy.

Inside, the house was sparsely furnished with red Arne Jacobsen Egg chairs; on the wall hung a Martin Kippenberger painting of a black boot. From the front windows you could see the San Fernando Valley spread out, an ocean of rooftops. Opie told Taschen that they'd only need to work outside. "But let me check with you about your boundaries," Opie said. "I don't want to do anything to piss you off." She explained that she'd be shooting Pig Pen pouring water around the perimeter of the house from a gas can, and then lighting matches. (Later, she'd superimpose images of raging fires onto the pictures.) "It's weird," Opie said after she described the premise of her film. "It's kind of a piece that's gonna work better under a Trump Administration."

"Right," Taschen said. "Because the world is ending."

Pig Pen squatted outside with the gas can, by the edge of the front deck—and, seemingly, the world—as Opie clicked her camera and offered directions: bend down more, turn toward the house, look a little crazier.

Opie got a shot that she loved: a reflection of Pig Pen in the windows of the Chemosphere, wearing a very intense expression and holding a lit match. She lifted up her camera to show Rasmussen. "It's just eye candy!" Opie said. "Isn't that ridiculous? It's so good it hurts my eyes!" ♦