

REGEN PROJECTS

Meyer, Richard. "Star Turn: Richard Meyer on Catherine Opie's Elizabeth Taylor Photographs." *Artforum* (January 2014) pp. 156 – 165 [ill.]



Left: Catherine Opie, *Untitled #6 (Elizabeth Taylor's Closet)*, 2012, ink-jet print.

Opposite page: Catherine Opie, *Andy Warhol to Elizabeth (Self-Portrait Artist)*, 2010–11, ink-jet print.

Star Turn

RICHARD MEYER ON CATHERINE OPIE'S ELIZABETH TAYLOR PHOTOGRAPHS

IN THE MID-1990s, Catherine Opie created a series of photographs, titled "Houses," that showed the facades of mansions in Bel Air and Beverly Hills. Seemingly devoid of inhabitants, the homes in these images—with their locked wrought-iron gates and ARMED PATROL lawn signs—manage to look vaguely forbidding despite verdant landscaping and bright Southern California sun. Opie was fully aware of the barricaded privacy and sense of social exclusion the pictures conveyed: "Many of these house photographs are about the closed door," she has said. "We never really know what's behind those closed doors."





Above: Catherine Opie, *Bedside Table*, 2010–11, ink-jet print.

Opposite page: Catherine Opie, *Jewels in Dressing Room*, 2010–11, ink-jet print.

In 2010, the doors to at least one Bel Air mansion opened fully to Opie's photographic practice. That year, Opie was granted unfettered access to the home and belongings of Elizabeth Taylor, a dispensation that permitted the artist to take pictures of the star's walk-in closets, personal mementos, famous jewels, couture dresses, furs, handbags, shoes, paintings, and, not least, pets. The unlikely pairing of Opie and Taylor came about through the fact that the women shared an accountant. And it was that CPA, one Derrick Lee, who proposed to Opie that she photograph the star.

Opie at first declined Lee's suggestion, explaining that she didn't portray celebrities in her documentary practice. Gradually, though, she changed her mind. Two photographic examples would become instrumental in making her think differently about the pictorial possibilities afforded by the links between spectatorship and celebrity, looking and being looked at. The first was a commissioned series by one of her favorite photographers, William Eggleston, depicting the decor and collections at Graceland, Elvis Presley's Memphis home; among the various objects on which Eggleston focused were the photographic and painterly likenesses of Elvis displayed throughout the residence. The second was Opie's own series documenting President Obama's first inauguration. Rather than photographing the swearing-in or any of the inaugural balls, Opie turned her attention to the crowds gathered in the winter cold on the National Mall. The Obamas appear in these pictures, but only as representations on a giant LED signboard hoisted over a truck some distance from the Capitol dome. In Opie's "Inauguration," 2009, as in Eggleston's "Graceland," 1983–84, the image of celebrity is already mediated, already a picture.

With these projects in mind, Opie returned to her accountant's proposal that she photograph Taylor. But rather than a conventional likeness, Opie envisioned an indirect portrait, comprising pictures of Taylor's home and possessions but not of the star herself. Over the course of six months, beginning in December 2010, Opie would take some three thousand pictures of the house and grounds, from which she would ultimately select and sequence a group of fifty for a limited-edition portfolio. In addition, a selection of 129 pictures, including all fifty from the portfolio, will appear in a forthcoming book. Lastly, a number of larger-format photographs of Taylor's clothes and jewels will be released as individual prints.

Opie's photographs present Taylor's domestic sphere as a minutely observed landscape of details and fragments, surfaces and textures. The photographer spent six months in the house, including entire days spent studying how the light moved through

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particular rooms. Again and again, Opie would zoom in tightly on an object or group of objects (pantsuits hanging in a closet, knickknacks gathered on a tabletop, a diamond tiara on a furniture cushion) as though to isolate particular things without intrusion from the many other things just beyond the frame. Because the images remain so resolutely focused, they rarely offer a sense of the overall logic of a room, much less the layout of the house.

As Opie's photographs make clear, Taylor was a collector many times over. Some of her collections were preciously rare, some refreshingly common, if not tacky. In the latter category, consider a view of

Taylor's bedside table. Hanging on the wall behind it are several carnival masks of the kind available in any Venetian tourist shop. The feathers from one of the masks overlie a photograph of Taylor's close friend Michael Jackson, which has been further adorned with a red silk (or perhaps plastic) flower pinned to it, boutonniere-like. Beneath the picture of Jackson, we see more photographs of friends and family in decorative frames, two paperweights, a heart-shaped silver box, a small brass bell, a table clock with ornamental leaves and berries, and some emery boards in a miniature ceramic shopping bag. And there, amid all these curios, is a slightly dog-eared



manual for a television remote control. Imagining Liz struggling with the instructions for her remote, viewers might fleetingly recall *Us Weekly*'s perennial refrain, "Stars! They're Just Like Us!" even as the general sense of unmitigated ease and material abundance reminds us that stars in fact aren't much like us at all—and never were. Opie's ambition here is not, as she puts it, to show us "Elizabeth Taylor's tchotchkes," but to document the visual and material heterogeneity—the archipelago of diverse object-worlds—that defined Taylor's home and, by extension, her life.

A comparison of two photographs yields a sense of the project's surprising dialectic of elegance and flamboyance, of elite culture on the one hand and exuberant kitsch on the other. Look first at a picture of the living room that showcases museum-quality Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings by Degas, van Gogh, Pissarro, and Renoir, among others, displayed over a blue couch. The tastefulness of Taylor's art (her father was an art dealer) consorts rather uneasily with some of the other, less exalted collections captured by Opie's camera, as demonstrated in the second photo, a close-up view of several toys laid out on the lavender carpet in the actress's bedroom. (The carpet, also evident in a photo of a Louis Vuitton hatbox with a droll tag reading MINE!, is of course intended to pick up the famous violet shade of Taylor's eyes, as are the lavender pillows on the living-room couch.) A small pink stuffed pig rests atop a brown wooden hog, who is further adorned with a set of blue Buddhist meditation beads. Parked next to the hog is a stuffed wolf, wittily attired in sheep's clothing. Opie has gotten down close to the floor to photograph this menagerie, but she has done so from an angle that permits a view of additional objects on the far side of the room, including what seems to be a small battalion of Pinocchio figurines.

The point of Opie's photograph is not to comment on Taylor's taste for stuffed animals but to register without condescension their presence in her home. Throughout the project, Opie assumes a stance of neither adulation nor irony; she plays neither the dedicated fan nor the disparaging critic. "My job," she told me, "is to bear witness," and she remains steadfast in her belief in the capacity of photography to document what might otherwise remain unseen, whether because we would not generally have access to it (Liz Taylor's bedroom) or because we've seen it so often that we've forgotten how to look carefully at it (a freeway, say, or a mini-mall, to cite the subjects of two of Opie's series). By photographing Taylor's things rather than the celebrity herself, Opie presents her not as a commodity but as a subject whose contradictory impulses and



Above: Catherine Opie. *Paintings*, 2010–11, ink-jet print.

Left: Catherine Opie. *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*, 2010–11, ink-jet print.

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Catherine Opie, *MINE!*, 2010–11, inkjet print.



objects—Impressionist paintings and stuffed animals—cannot be easily resolved. This is all the more paradoxical because Opie was photographing the commodities, many of them inordinately expensive, that Taylor owned.

ALTHOUGH AILING AT THE TIME, Taylor was present throughout the early months of Opie's shoot. During this period, the star neither spoke with nor met the photographer. This distance was preferable to Opie. She did not want an unfolding personal relationship to shape her approach. "I was making a portrait of Elizabeth Taylor through her home," Opie notes. "I wanted the home to be able to speak to me." However, the photographer was later informed by a member of the household staff that Taylor would sometimes watch through the window as Opie walked around the grounds. The image of Taylor spying on Opie is a neat reversal of the typical relationship of star and gazer, subject and photographer. Here, it is Opie who becomes the object of visual interest for Taylor even as the former passes through the latter's home deciding what rooms and possessions to picture.

Opie's watchful presence in Taylor's home is made explicit in several images in the series, including one in which the photographer is reflected in the glass covering a Warhol silk screen of Liz. Just as Opie "shadows" Taylor by shooting her belongings

and domestic space, so the photographer here emerges—faint yet clearly visible—from within the very pictorial field of an iconic image of the star. Opie enters into visual dialogue, then, not only with Liz but also with Warhol. In this photograph, as in others in which Opie's face appears as a reflection (on the lens of a pair of Taylor's sunglasses, on the mirrored wall above the breakfast nook), the photographer reminds us that we are seeing a subjective and embodied view of Taylor's home and possessions. There is no magisterial or all-knowing camera eye.

But if Opie's eye is neither judgmental nor omniscient, that does not mean it is not discerning. In some of the project's strongest photographs—a group of nineteen images of Taylor's closets—this discernment seems especially acute. Rather than emphasizing the expansiveness of the closets, Opie chooses to show tightly framed segments of the star's wardrobe—evening jackets and pantsuits, nightgowns and caftans, fur coats and designer dresses. No hangers, no labels, and only a few hems are visible. We are given a luxe assortment of textures and patterns. Although Opie refers to these images as "the closets," we never actually see the interior walls of the walk-in, often cedar-lined chambers. Indeed, there is virtually no sense of spatial depth or recession. But this seeming lack is countered by the extravagant surfeit of garments, stuffed tightly on

racks with no space between them, aligned across the visual field both vertically and horizontally.

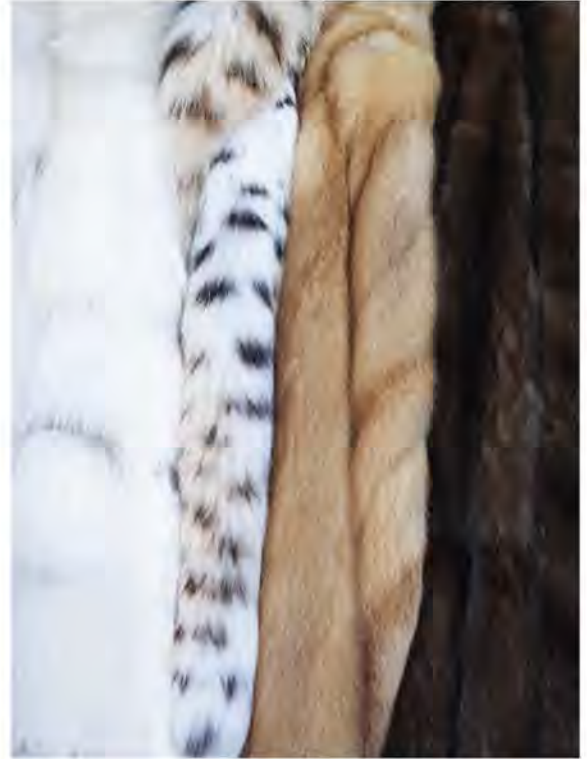
Opie brought lights and a camera into Taylor's closets but did not disturb or rearrange the clothing therein. (Taylor's personal assistant, Tim Mendelson, would run the back of his hand down each dress or jacket just before its photo was taken. Opie calls this process "fluffing," a sly reference to the quite different preparatory procedure used in the adult-film industry.) The pictures do not showcase (or fetishize) the design of individual items. They show us instead the clothes—fastidiously organized by color and type—as they would have appeared to Taylor herself. In one spectacular shot, we are confronted by twelve silken lengths of material in shades ranging from metallic gray to olive green to nubby raspberry to royal blue. When I first saw this photograph, I couldn't figure out what kind of clothing I was looking at. Mendelson later told me that this section of Taylor's closet was devoted to pants; I still read the image as, simply, vividly colored ribbons of fabric.

When Opie prints the closet images in their largest format (forty by thirty inches), the effect is remarkable. From a distance, it is almost as though we are looking at color swatches or passages of paint. Yet the garments appear increasingly material the closer one moves to the photograph. The size mirrors the scale of the clothes themselves, amplifying the



Left: Catherine Opie, *Untitled #11 (Elizabeth Taylor's Closet)*, 2012, ink-jet print.

Right: Catherine Opie, *Untitled #7 (Elizabeth Taylor's Closet)*, 2012, ink-jet print.



impression of being literally inside Taylor's closet. Opie's large-format photograph of fur coats all but luxuriates in the plush surface and sumptuous appeal of the pelts. The relative scarcity of furs on view (by my count there are five) only emphasizes their material opulence and tonal range (from solid white to black on white to honey to deep brown). Juxtapose this with another closet photo showing far less expected outerwear—leather bomber jackets, fringed suede western jackets, a shearling coat with a blue patch of the globe on it. The second photograph provides a “butch” counterpart to the “femme” furs and reminds us of the way in which Taylor's charisma could encompass maverick brashness as well as mink-coat glamour.

I cannot see Opie's pictures of Taylor's clothes without comparing them with the quite different photographs of the star's wardrobe that appeared in a December 2011 Christie's auction catalogue. Actually, the clothing appeared in two catalogues (*Fashion & Accessories* and *The Icon & Her Haute Couture*), which together represented what Christie's

called “the most valuable private collection of fashion ever sold at auction.” Those two sales were themselves part of a broader series of auctions, collectively known as “The Collection of Elizabeth Taylor,” that also included jewelry, fine and decorative art, and film memorabilia. A triumph of global marketing, the “Collection of Elizabeth Taylor” auctions in New York were preceded by preview exhibitions in Moscow, London, Paris, Los Angeles, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Geneva, during which selected items for sale were presented beneath blow-ups of Taylor in her prime. Against one wall of the preview exhibition at the MOCA Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles, for instance, pictures of Liz as Gloria in *Butterfield 8*, Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* helped dramatize the desirability and value of the rather smaller items (the scripts for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *National Velvet* and the book *Nibbles and Me*, a memoir of Taylor and her pet chipmunk that the former authored when she was thirteen years old). The visual allure of the movie

star seamlessly blended with the availability of her memorabilia.

In 1964, Taylor characterized the function of her celebrity as a capitalist transaction: “The Elizabeth Taylor who's famous, the one on celluloid, really has no depth or meaning to me. It's a totally superficial working thing, a commodity.” Christie's, not surprisingly, knew how to use the Elizabeth Taylor commodity, the working thing, the image, to expert effect. The auction house sold every single one of the 1,778 lots from Taylor's estate, sometimes for as much as fifty times the presale estimate.

If we compare one of Opie's “closets” with a photograph from *The Icon & Her Haute Couture*, we get a vivid sense of the different logics that governed each project. An Opie photograph showcasing pantsuits lets us see the sleeves (and, in a few cases, the shoulders) of a range of jackets, as well as feathers and beading. But our comprehension of the individual designs of the items is less acute than our impression of the overall palette of pale pink, purple, teal, seafoam, and fuchsia. The viewer is not being asked

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to ogle, envy, or desire discrete pieces of Taylor's wardrobe as totems of Hollywood glamour. Instead we are asked to see Taylor's clothes as a series of multiform, quasi-abstract compositions.

The purple-and-blue jacket that appears in the middle right of this photo receives its own page in the Christie's catalogue. There, we see the iridescent jacket, along with accompanying blue pants, displayed on a mannequin, beside a hat and a pair of shoes. The caption informs us about a "Gianfranco Ferré lavender embroidered silk trouser suit . . . comprising a two-tone jacket embroidered in silver and gold with Gothic waves; the top with embroidered tulle overlay and lavender silk crepe palazzo pants; with matching shoes, an associated lavender satin Prada bag and a hat with spotted nun's veiling." And then below, all in purple print: "The ensemble, with the exception of the hat, was worn to Miss Taylor's investiture as a Dame of the British Empire, May 16, 2000." For Christie's, the name of the couturier, the biographical context, design details, materials, and affiliated accessories are essential information, as is the presale estimate, which is listed as \$1,000–\$2,000. The hammer price was \$40,000. The surplus value was created by Taylor's celebrity—by the fact that the purchaser would get to own (and presumably wear) a garment made expressly for a movie star. And, of course, the catalogue included a photograph of Taylor, newly minted as a Dame, wearing the pantsuit.

Christie's auction of "The Collection of Elizabeth Taylor" was posthumous. Taylor died, at seventy-nine, in March 2011, some months into Opie's photo shoot. Her death transformed her belongings into an inventory of objects to be bequeathed or auctioned off—in short, into an estate. Opie remained committed to completing her complex "portrait" of Taylor even after her subject was no longer living: "I continued to photograph as the house began to be dismantled. It was really an unbelievable thing to witness how quickly somebody's life is figured out."

As a documentary photographer, Opie has long been aware that the contemporary scene she captures may all but instantaneously acquire undreamed-of historical significance. "It happens to me time and time again. . . . When I was photographing Wall Street, 9/11 happened. When I was photographing freeways, the Northridge earthquake happened." And when Opie was photographing Elizabeth Taylor's home, the life of the fabled movie star passed into history. Writing of Warhol's Marilyn Monroe silk screens, which were begun shortly after Monroe's death in 1962, Thomas Crow asks: "How does one handle the fact of celebrity death? Where does one put the curiously intimate knowledge one possesses of an unknown figure, and how does one come to terms with the sense of loss—the absence of a richly

imagined presence that was never really there?" In the case of Opie's project, the sense of a "curiously intimate knowledge . . . of an unknown figure" is particularly acute. Opie was offered entrée into Taylor's home yet never met her; she grew close to Mendelson and other household staff members yet was not herself in the employ of the star. She handled the fact of Taylor's death—its force and finality—by leaving the tension between absence and presence unresolved, refusing to give in to a commemorative impulse that was never intended to define the project in the first place.

A last photograph may make the point. It shows several extraordinary jewels—an emerald-and-diamond ring and earrings, a sapphire ring—housed in what look like Lucite cases and placed somewhat unceremoniously inside a white shopping bag. When Opie shot it, the jewelry was being packed up by a Christie's staff member in preparation for auction. In other words, Opie captured the final moment in which the renowned gems would reside on Taylor's property, but rather than trumpeting this fact, the photograph carries this intimate knowledge as a kind of secret message.

WHEN I FIRST LEARNED about Opie's project of photographing Taylor's home and belongings, it immediately struck me as queer. A self-described "dyke" photographer picturing the closets of a woman who is both one of the greatest icons of femininity and a favorite of gay men (in part because of her outspoken support for people with AIDS, beginning with her friend Rock Hudson in 1985) seemed ready-made for visual flamboyance, excess, theatrical flair, and the flouting of various norms of gender and domesticity.

I kept waiting for the defiant nonconformity embodied by Opie in works such as *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994, which features the artist in full s/m regalia to emerge as a structuring presence in the photographs of Taylor's home and possessions. Instead, I found that Opie—and queerness—remained a subtle reflection, a respectful witness. In a situation that called for performativity and masquerade, the pictures seemed deadpan, even earnest. It occurred to me that if the photos of oversize diamonds and beaded pantsuits in the Christie's catalogues were, in the last analysis, totally camp, Opie's photographs were not.

I started to look at photographs of Opie, rather than only at photographs by her, to think through her potentially queer relation to the Taylor project. I turned, for example, to a picture of Opie in her studio published in *C* magazine ("California Style: The Golden State's Lifestyle Magazine") in spring 2013. Looking dapper in a sport jacket, white glasses and

Page from *The Collection of Elizabeth Taylor III: The Icon & Her Haute Couture, Evening Sale* (Christie's, 2011).





Has Opie traded subcultural identification for sapphire rings and Prada handbags? Has she forsaken Idexa's tattoo parlor for Liz's Bel Air mansion?

Catherine Opie, *700 Nimes Road, Last Day with Jewelry, 2010-11*, ink-jet print.

a newsboy cap, Opie sits in a rocking chair beside her dog, Sunny. A large photographer's light on a tripod stands in the left corner of the room. Several of the "closet" photographs hang on the studio walls. The gap between Opie's butch appearance and the languorous femininity of Taylor's textiles could hardly be more dramatic.

Opie told me that several of her gay male friends were envious of her access to Taylor's walk-in closets. For Opie, however, Taylor's fur coats, designer handbags, and couture occupied not a space of glitz and fabulosity but a foreign terrain to be studied in a dispassionate, almost ethnographic, manner. "I'm a boy-girl," Opie told me, and from her perspective, Taylor's makeup, jewels, and designer dresses were less familiar props than the leather hoods, clamps, and fetish wear featured in her s/m portraits. As the photographer pointed out, "I don't have makeup or perfume bottles in my house—or fur coats or evening gowns, for that matter." The interest of Taylor's objects for Opie was to a great extent their role within a vast machinery of commercialized femininity—from eyebrow pencils and perfume bottles to Chanel sling backs and diamond tiaras.

I thought about the queer "Portraits" with which Opie made her name in the early '90s. By her own account, Opie sought in these pictures to elevate and dignify friends from the s/m community by endowing their images with the lush color and formal stature of Renaissance portraits. Of these photographs' queer-identified subjects, Opie says, "They're very royal. I say that my friends are like my royal family." She has also stated that "instead of just showing the tattoos and the piercings and the markings on the body, I wanted to do a series of portraits of this community that were incredibly noble." Opie has recently created images of her friends using, in some cases, a larger format or oval frames to more closely mimic old-master portraiture. In one 2012 photograph, we return to the subject of a 1993 portrait, Idexa (the proprietor of the Black and Blue tattoo parlor in San Francisco), to find her magnificently inked from shoulders to knees. The central proposition remains, however, that sexually nonnormative subjects deserve nothing less than the pictorial treatment accorded old-world aristocracy.

When Opie photographed Liz Taylor's home and belongings, there was no need for the star's possessions to be elevated or ennobled. Indeed, one of the

most successful things about the project is the way it humanizes rather than deifies the everyday life of a celebrity. Still, one might wonder, has Opie traded subcultural identification for sapphire rings and Prada handbags? Has she forsaken Idexa's tattoo parlor for Liz's Bel Air mansion?

But in fact such questions miss the point. Why should Opie have to manifest a lesbian sensibility in the Taylor project? As a photographer, she remains committed to a range of documentary and creative undertakings, including but not limited to portraits of the s/m community she first pictured decades ago. Opie's large-scale portrait of Idexa and her dazzling, Technicolor tattoos can stand beside a picture of Elizabeth Taylor's mirror reflecting part of Taylor's equally dazzling collection of designer handbags. Each photograph is a stunning admixture of high and low, louche and regal, surface ornament and depth, deviance and elegance. In the end, it may be the dialogue between such diverse projects—and the freedom to move in and out of the different cultural and subcultural spaces they represent—that offers the queerest vision of all. □

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Above: Catherine Opie with her dog Sunny, artist's studio, Los Angeles, March 8, 2013. From C magazine, May 2013. Photo: Jessica Sample.



Above, right: Catherine Opie, *Frankie*, 1995, C-print, 20 x 16".

Right: Catherine Opie, *Idexa*, 2012, inkjet print, 50 x 38 1/2".

