

# REGEN PROJECTS

Valdez, Sarah, "Catherine Opie at Regen Projects," *Art in America*, May 2004, p. 170-171, il.

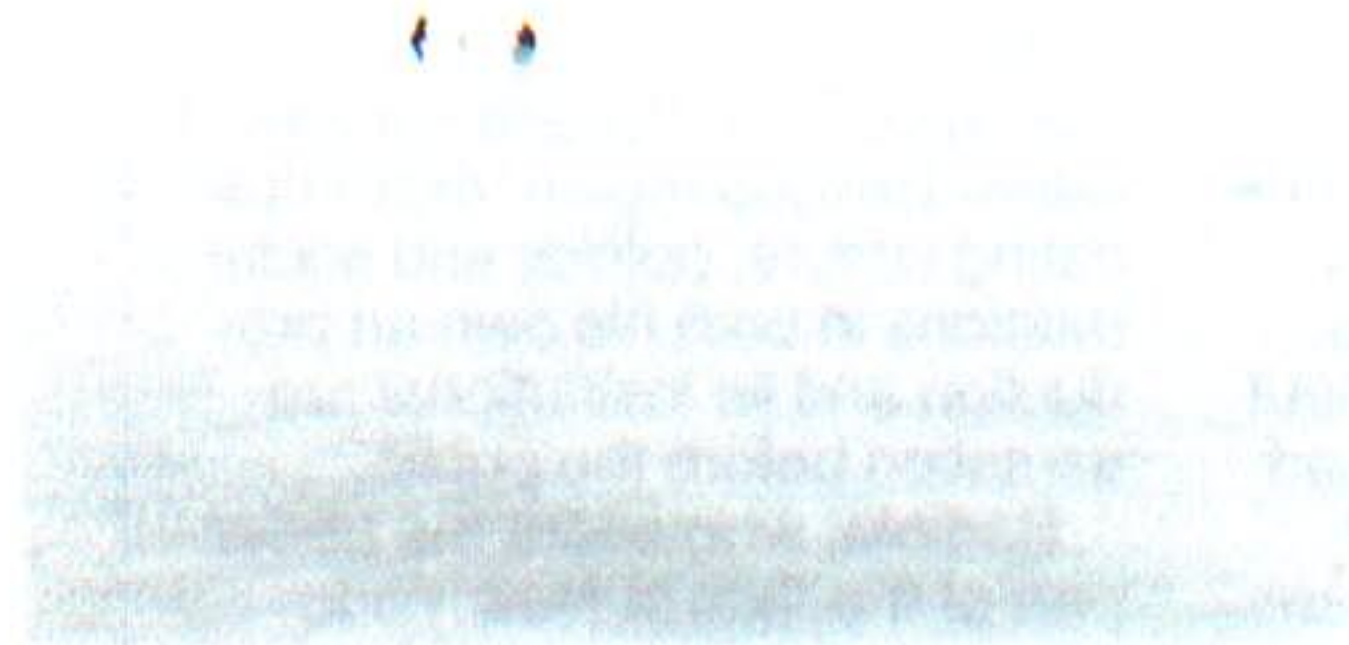
## Art in America

### LOS ANGELES

#### Catherine Opie at Regen Projects

Catherine Opie has always been interested in using her photography to inspect the ways various marginal communities live, as well as how they signify themselves and differentiate from others. Her status as an unflinching social documentarian would seem to be (but actually isn't) compromised by her latest body of work, a study of California surfers, since they represent a lifestyle many folks idealize. Opie's subjects, however, are not the usual perfect-bodied champions ripping big waves under the blazing sun, but regular looking people of various ages, genders and skin tones posing on the beach or waiting in the water on overcast days.

In this recent exhibition [which traveled to Gorney Bravin + Lee in New York], Opie presented two distinct series of large C-prints (all 2003), one consisting of close-up frontal portraits, and the other of more distant views. All are impeccably composed and beautifully printed. The individuals in the portraits appear angelic, dripping wet and holding boards as saints might pose with the attributes of their martyrdoms. They look directly into the camera with no particular expression—one assumes to communicate an honest presence. Details like sand stuck in surfboard wax, pimples, beads of water on flesh and wet eyelashes clumped together give a gratifying sense of immediacy. Brightly colored fiberglass boards work well compositionally, with chunky details anchoring each image and playing off the horizon where sand meets surf behind each person.



Catherine Opie: *Untitled #8 (Surfers)*, 2003, C-print, 50 by 40 inches; at Regen Projects.

The other series contains no land and shows clusters of small, faraway people, usually from the back, in different configurations, waiting for waves (several of these photos are presently on view in the Whitney Biennial). Gray dominates, and the neutral monochrome has an elegant, abstract appeal. Lone surfers sometimes drift away from a pack, the way people drift around in life, perennially caught between volition and circumstance. These figures, like those in Asian landscape painting, are dwarfed by their surroundings; in the strongest two pieces in the exhibition, they can barely be discerned. It's hard not to be a little nostalgic for Opie's well-known work from the early '90s—powerful, personal and subversive portraits of her friends in the queer S/M community. But in these new works there's something comforting, perhaps even right, about the idea of people being much less important than they imagine themselves to be. —Sarah Valdez