

# REGEN PROJECTS

Jobey, Liz. "Catherine Opie's photographs shine a spotlight on the marginalised."  
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Liz Jobey MAY 14, 2021

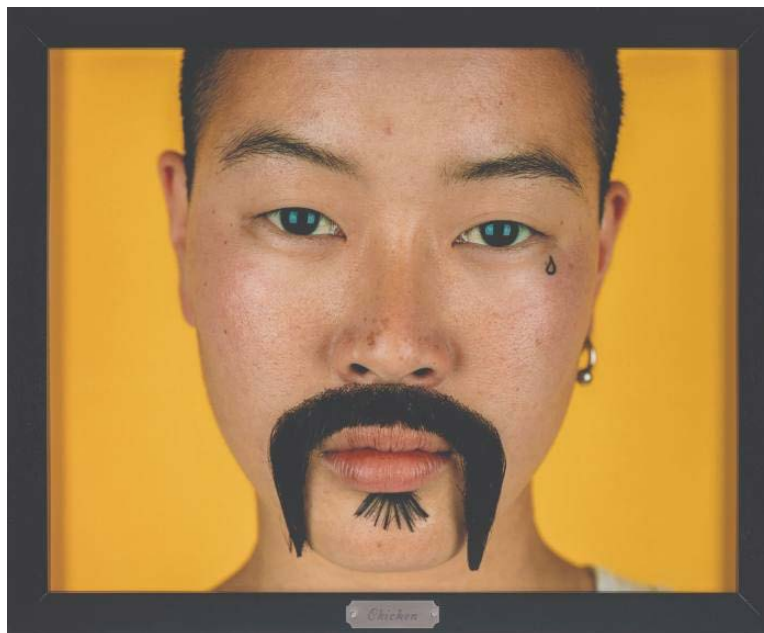
Catherine Opie and I are sitting face to face, each framed by the rectangular computer screens that, as with the rest of us, have become our windows on the world. But in this case, there is a difference. Seeing her settled comfortably in a chair, her cheerful, bespectacled face looking directly into the camera, I realise how familiar this framing must be to her. It is almost exactly the same as the one she often chooses for her portraits, which she has been making since the early 1990s and which run like a ground bass beneath her other photographic works.

Her earliest portraits were statements about gender identity and sexual orientation, and her sitters were friends from the BDSM and leather community in San Francisco, the city where she studied in the mid-1980s. In her first series, "Being and Having" (1991), each subject was shot in close-up, against a bright yellow background, wearing a fake moustache or beard: in sync with the theory of the time, it suggested gender was essentially performative.

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A second series, “Portraits” (1993-97), this time both single figures and couples, followed, and it was then she decided on the formal construction of her portraits. With some adjustments, she has used it ever since: the sitter placed against a strongly coloured background — jewel colours of deep greens and purples, reds and blues — looking directly into the camera and situated centrally in the frame. This rather conservative visual architecture was inspired, she explains, by seeing portraits by 16th-century artist Hans Holbein the Younger. She wanted to show the members of her community as being “incredibly noble”.

It’s a word she still uses when talking about her portraits, some of which now hang in museums and public galleries across the globe. Her more recent sitters tend to be friends and colleagues from the art world, such as artists Gillian Wearing, Anish Kapoor and David Hockney and the New Yorker writer and curator Hilton Als.



‘Chicken,’ 1991, from the series Being and Having

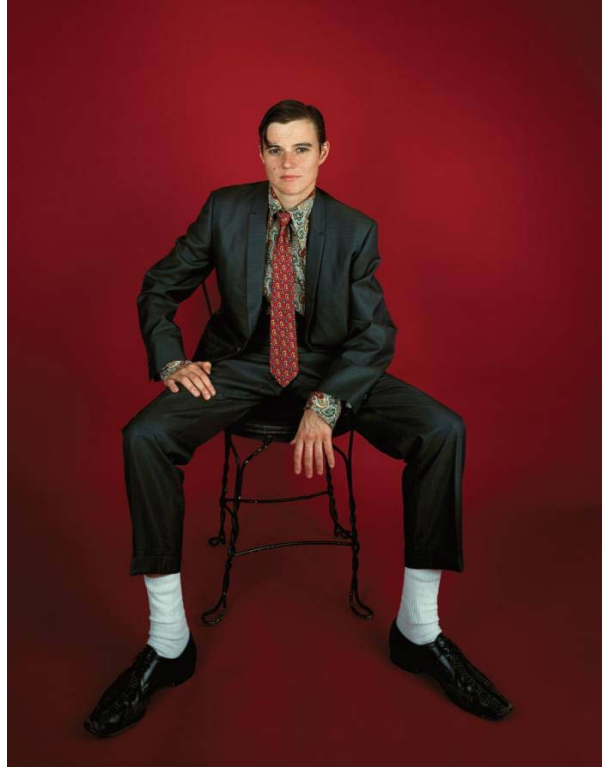
The portraits, she says, belong to a line that runs through the history of painting to photography: “They’re meant to be timeless but also of the time, and that is really hard to do with a camera. But when you bring in the conversation about the history of painting imbued within this work, it changes the way you as a viewer enter it, too.”

I’d read that she demands total control in the studio. When I ask whether her sitters ever resist, she says firmly: “No. When I enter the studio, they know who I am.”

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**Opie, who has lived in California** for most of her life, turned 60 in April. Across almost four decades, her work has shifted between gender politics and a wider exploration of the American landscape, looking in particular at ways in which the environment has shaped and been shaped by the communities that inhabit it.

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'Angela Scheirl', 1993, from the series Portraits (1993-97)

She entered the art world during the 1990s, when conceptualism had become the dominant mode in photography, and documentary — what she sometimes refers to as “storytelling” — had been pushed to the margins. Her work is rooted in documentary, but made with a conceptual formality that has secured her reputation.

It is while we are talking about this that I realise, with something of a jolt, that on screen she is framed in almost exactly the same position as in the pair of early self-portraits that brought her to public attention when they were shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1995. Twenty-five years later, they probably still count as her most famous pictures, which she’s had to explain, and to a degree justify, ever since.

In the first, “Self-Portrait/Cutting” (1993), the back of Opie’s head and upper torso are framed by the camera. She is naked, bar a tattoo around her right bicep, and between her shoulder blades, carved into her flesh in the style of a child’s drawing, are two stick figures, both wearing skirts, holding hands. Behind them is a house, with smoke coming from the chimney, and above them the sun peeps out over a cloud as a couple of birds fly by. It was a reaction, she said later, to the break-up of a relationship that she thought was going to provide her with a home. It was her version of a little lesbian utopia, carved in blood.

The second image was more extreme. In “Self-Portrait/Pervert” (1994), she is naked to the waist, this time facing the camera, but her head is covered by a full BDSM leather hood — the kind made familiar to the art-going public by Robert Mapplethorpe’s “X Portfolio”. She has a ring through her right nipple, and down each arm, from shoulder to wrist, a line of hypodermic needles has been threaded in and out of the flesh. There is a black-and-gold backdrop behind her; her fingers are quietly laced together in her lap.

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Across her chest, above her breasts, the word “Pervert” has been carved in a blood-red cursive script with what somehow manages to suggest a flourish.



Self-Portrait/Cutting, 1993.

The two images are so shocking, so confrontational: once seen they are hard to forget. It's a struggle to reconcile them with the warm, friendly person on the other side of the screen. But facing her on Zoom, I realise I'm in possession of some personal information not normally available in this kind of encounter. Under her sweater, the tracery of the scars must still be there.

When I ask her about those pictures, she says: “That work came around because of Aids and identity politics and homophobia. It would never have been made without becoming an activist and part of ACT UP and Queer Nation . . . You have to realise that I had an entire community of friends die of Aids, and blood was what was feared.”

I wonder if, looking back, she felt the self-portraits had been crucial to the development of her work, or hampered it — maybe given people a false idea about her?

“I think it was both. I never regretted it,” she says. “I couldn't live with ‘Pervert’, but I have never regretted making it. It's too hard of an image of myself to live with on a daily basis, because it's an expression that I did at a very specific time because I was upset, and I was angry. But it isn't the whole sum of me as a person . . . People automatically assume that that's the sum of you, and it's only a piece, only a fragment of a puzzle, so to speak.”

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Catherine Opie photographed at her studio in LA © Devyn Galindo

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**This month, Phaidon publishes a book** dedicated to Opie’s life and work across her entire career, from her earliest portraits to her most recent installation, “Rhetorical Landscapes”, which combines animated political collages made during the Trump era with studies of serene but ecologically fragile Florida swamps — an invocation of the twin dangers facing contemporary America.



‘Oliver in a Tutu’, 2004

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The book collects her works thematically rather than chronologically, with sections on “People”, “Place” and “Politics”, accompanied by essays and interviews. The introductory essay on the concept of home by curator Elizabeth AT Smith reveals a central paradox of Opie’s life and work: for all her extremism, what she always longed for was a stable domestic relationship and a child.

Ten years after those first two self-portraits, she made another, a sort of companion piece — except the distance between the first two and the third seems to measure the limits of her emotional desires. “Self-Portrait/Nursing” (2004) shows her seated, once again naked to the waist, but this time her face is uncovered and in her arms she is cradling an angelic blond child, gazing down at him watchfully as he suckles her left breast. This is her son, Oliver, who is now 19.



Self-Portrait/Nursing, 2004

That same year, she embarked on a new series of photographs which reflected some of the contentment of her domestic life. “In and Around Home” shows Opie with her wife, artist Julie Burleigh, who she met in 1999, in Los Angeles. It is a portrait of a warm, hectic, loving household, complete with toddler, fridge magnets and a dog, and it extends into the local neighbourhood of West Adams in LA.

In some senses, it was a sequel to another series, “Domestic” (1995-98), where she travelled 9,000 miles across the US to photograph lesbian couples in their homes. This was partly motivated by seeing the MoMA exhibition “Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort” in 1991 and realising, she has said, that “there was no queer family involved”.

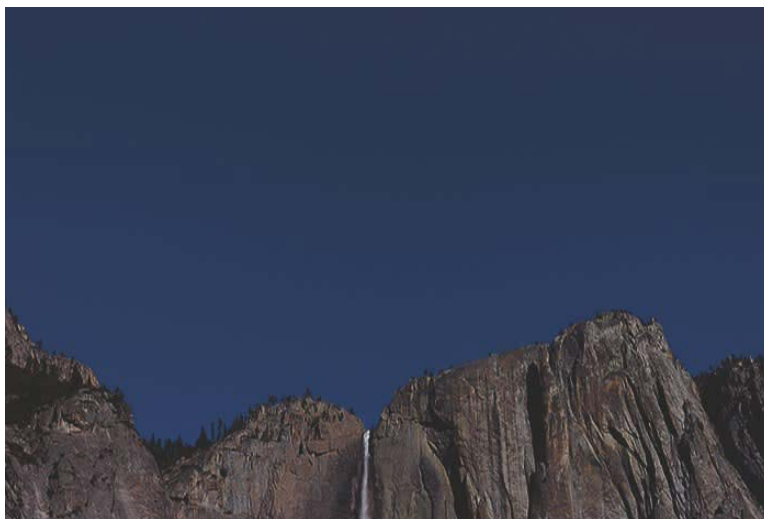
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In the mid-1990s, Opie began what would become a parallel preoccupation in her work. She had always been interested in where and how people lived; at the age of nine, when she'd been given her first camera, she had gone round on her bike photographing her local neighbourhood: "I think for me it was a way I made sense of the world."



'Flipper, Tanya, Chloe & Harriet, San Francisco, California', 1995, from the series Domestic

For her postgraduate thesis at the California Institute of Arts in 1988, she made an installation, "Master Plan", combining photographs of the suburbs of nearby Valencia, on the outskirts of LA, which was being developed as a model community, with architects' plans, interiors, portraits and interviews with residents. As the early portraits had done, it established a way of exploring how societies were organised by focusing on the buildings and structures around them. "I don't think very much differently from buildings to people, to be honest," she says.



'Cobalt Blue Sky', 2015

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The new book covers the totality of her work, from architectural structures such as freeways and mini-malls, ice houses and cityscapes, to portrait studies of high school football players and surfers far out at sea. In 2009, she spent 10 days on a container ship sailing from Korea to Long Beach, photographing the horizon at sunrise and sunset, dividing equal areas of sky and sea.

When I ask about how she decides to move from one subject to another, she says: “It’s a whirlwind of histories that meld together with how I’m experiencing my life in any given moment. It’s out of a great love of humanity and curiosity and the love of looking. I obviously really like to look. And my wife would say it [should] be, ‘I really love to stare.’”

In 2010-11, Opie found herself inside a Bel Air mansion — similar to those whose pristine, exclusory facades she had photographed in an earlier series, “Houses”. This was 700 Nimes Road, the home of Elizabeth Taylor. Taylor was suffering from ill health at the time so the two never met, but you can imagine Opie padding around the silent rooms with her camera on thick pile carpets with the smell of stale hairspray and perfume in the air.



Untitled #2 (Freeways), 1994

She turned to architecture again for her first film, *The Modernist* (2018), this time to LA’s famed mid-century houses. Stylistically, it pays homage to Chris Marker’s 1962 film *La Jetée*, but replaces the threat of nuclear devastation with that of fake news and false utopias and what she identified at the time as Trump’s “rhetoric of nostalgia”. Thematically, it links with her involvement in public protest and demonstrations, which she has photographed across the decades and refers to as “political landscapes” rather than street photography, “because [politics] is part of the landscape”.

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**Last year, she and Burleigh bought** a camper van and drove across the southern states to Louisiana. Ostensibly it was to deliver Oliver for his first year at Tulane University. “We couldn’t fly and we wanted to have that parental experience of moving our child into their dorm,” Opie says. “He was leaving home for the first time.”

After dropping him off, they “trekked around the country for three-and-a-half weeks” and Opie is now in the process of editing a body of work called “2020”. “I’m a big believer in the American road trip,” she says. That way she can take the country’s pulse, looking at “the symbols within these landscapes that continue to create this myth of America,



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especially in terms of racism and the history of slavery... You can read everything that you can, but what photographs do is allow you to observe the structure of places and the situation.”



'Arsonist (The Modernist)', 2016

I wondered if she felt Oliver was better equipped to join the outside world than she had been at his age. “Oh yeah,” she says, laughing. “Totally different ballgame.” Her father was a Republican and a collector of political campaign memorabilia. Her mother was a teacher and a keen amateur film-maker. When they lived in Ohio, her father ran the family art supplies business, but when they moved to Poway, California, which she says “looked like the middle of a John Wayne movie”, he went into real estate. He made sure Opie got her real estate licence at 18: “He didn’t think the art thing would work out.”

I wonder when she came out to them. “Oh gosh, not till I was in my twenties — 20, 21. Even though I knew I already had crushes in high school it wasn’t until I was in San Francisco that I completely accepted my sexuality.”

How did her parents react? “My dad thought it was cool. Then he got sad that I wouldn’t get married and he wouldn’t be able to walk me down the aisle. And my mom just said, ‘OK, I don’t want to talk about it.’ But through the years she obviously had to come to a better acceptance of it.”

What had drawn her to BDSM and leather in San Francisco? “I think it allowed me to understand consensuality,” she says. “The leather community is one of the most lovely communities that allows you to grapple with whatever’s on your plate in a very humane way. It’s all negotiated... It’s amazing to learn what your limits are within your own body

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in a safe space. Very few people get to have that kind of awareness around their body, especially in their mid-twenties. Most people don't get to negotiate sex in that way."



'Gillian', 2017, from Portraits and Landscapes

Going back to those early works, she says: "I made the first self-portrait in my early thirties. It's amazing how many people come up to me and tell me how important those images were for them, and being able to deal with their own sexuality and their own relationship to their bodies and coming out.

"Without work being made in those realms — in the same way that Mapplethorpe made his work — you wouldn't be able to have those conversations and try to move forward because of representation." In the end, she adds: "It really just comes down to, well, who gets represented?"

*"Catherine Opie" is published by Phaidon*

All artworks courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Lehmann Maupin, New York/Hong Kong/Seoul/London; Thomas Dane Gallery, London and Naples; and Peder Lund, Oslo