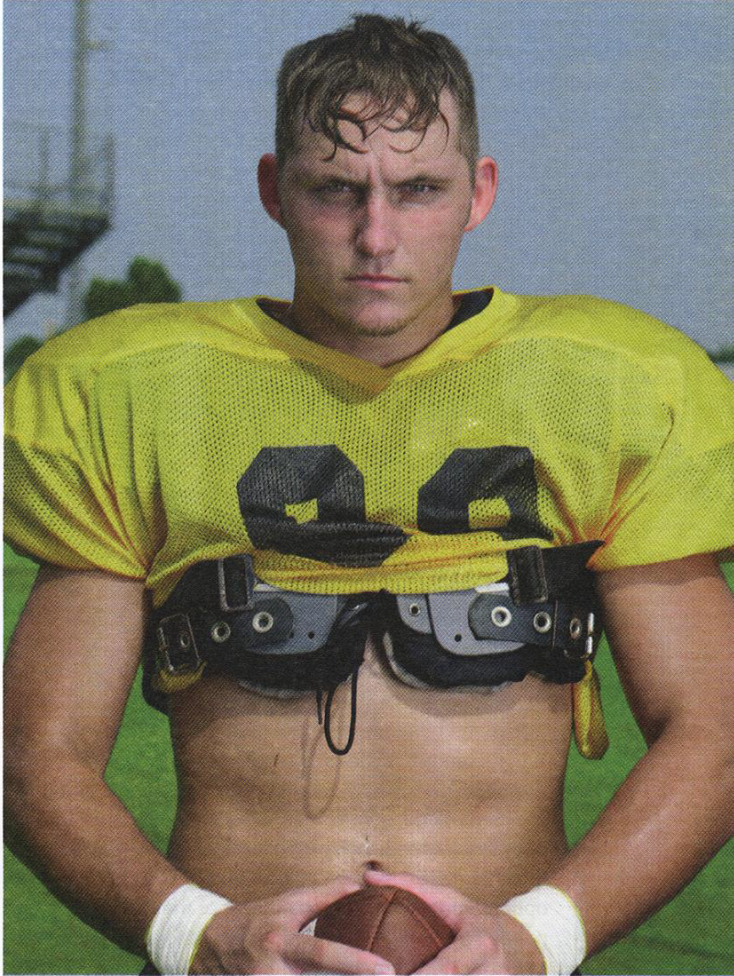


Schad, Ed "Catherine Opie Regen Projects," *Art Review*, Issue 23, June 2008



CATHERINE OPIE

REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES
10 APRIL - 17 MAY

Catherine Opie's new photographs of American high school football continue her documentation of identity and communities in a physical and social landscape. Over the course of one football season, Opie travelled across the US to photograph both individual players and game-time action set against expanses of bright, rainy or pitchy skies. Unlike her photos of transgender and leather communities in Los Angeles, where rules of gender are bent, broken

or negotiated, the football photos zero in on codes of masculinity as they are etched into American boys. Also unlike her earlier work, Opie now tracks a mainstream social group, nationwide rather than in the margins.

American high school football, probably one of the most coded activities around, is a social universe, a big business and one of the few opportunities for a small town or school to receive statewide or national recognition. The pressure of this world on 14-to-18-year-olds is enormous – their failings are a source of shame and their victories a burst of excessive pride, then often crippling nostalgia. The teens are neither allowed to be children nor capable of being adults; they are required to be almost superhuman, to vault themselves and their community into fleeting celebrity.

Opie knows Americans ask too much of these boys, and her portraits picture them between charged, vulnerable moments and dark comedy. *Broc* (all works 2007) has the complexion of a babe and is swamped by his outsize pads and tossed hair. *Blaine* is undeniably a runt enacting a posture of warrior, a pose both forced and clumsily earnest. Opie's portraits catch each boy's youth in the process of its elimination – like *Seth*, the boys can't smile because they need to be 'tough', but they can't hide their pimples either.

Football's visibility and its drive to manufacture a certain version of masculinity perfectly fits Opie's career-long interest in identity's ambivalence towards being captured or understood – identity's constant transitions and resistance to easy definitions. In important ways, the new series suits Opie's practice better than her recent surfer series. Surfing, despite Opie's muted presentation, is irresistibly a cool leisure activity known as an alternative to the rigours of social codes and the responsibilities of American life. Football, on the other hand, becomes a dreary metaphor and extension of that life's pressures.

To capture this larger context, Opie opened her lens to the landscape, dwelling on moments in football games less determined by action than by tension, anticipation and release. The best of the group, *Football Landscape #9 (Crenshaw v. Jefferson, Los Angeles, CA)*, captures what the boys are up against. Set against a void of dark, a defensive line, ragtag and tiny, waits to see if it can stop the other team's attack. The group is tired; they are together, but barely. The presence of the dark is overwhelming. Opie deftly shows the weight of each boy's impending duty, their immersion in a drama unfolding without their comprehension. *Ed Schad*

Josh, 2007, c-print,
75 x 56 cm,
edition of 5.
Courtesy Regen Projects,
Los Angeles