

REGEN PROJECTS

Churchman, Fi. "Catherine Opie." *ArtReview* (April 2020) pp. 56 – 63 [ill.]

ArtReview

Catherine Opie

by Fi Churchman



Untitled #3 (Swamps), 2019, pigment print, 102 × 152 cm.
© the artist. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS

“I bear witness”



Untitled #2 (Swamps), 2019, pigment print, 102 x 152 cm.
© the artist. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS



above *Rhetorical Landscapes*, 2020 (installation view).
Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

facing page *Untitled #3 (Political Collage)* (still), 2019, animated digital
collage. © the artist. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS

the ecosystem but also reinforce its impenetrability, reflected here in the opaque, glassy black water.

By contrast, the animations are transparent in their politics and – inspired by Terry Gilliam’s stop-motion animations for *Monty Python* – address subjects ranging from the US’s prejudiced treatment of minorities, the resurgence of white supremacy, partisan politics, gun laws and extreme patriotism, to the environmental crisis and impact of industrial development. They do this, however, with a dose of humour and absurdity: on one screen an ice cream cone falls on the heads of a group of white supremacists; guns fall from the top of another screen and pile up into a mountain of weapons; and skyscrapers bob around amid magazine cuttings of waterscapes, while supporters of Trump’s wall ‘drown’ in a corner and a baby seal peers out from the middle of the flood, the scene topped with a beach umbrella. The irony now, of course, is that nature seems to be getting on with its business while humanity struggles.

Does criticality in these images, then, also lie in the issue of visibility? To make something visible is to acknowledge its existence – whether the subject is the environment, or politics, or human communities. So how does Opie navigate the tension between the seen and unseen? How does she operate her camera in a way that makes the invisible visible, without imposing onto the subject a specific meaning, or category, or stereotype? Opie doesn’t mention it explicitly when we speak, but there’s an underlying sense throughout her series that in order to make her subjects visible in a way that debunks the stereotype, she perverts existing and normative understandings of them. In doing so, this has allowed Opie room to manoeuvre between

wide-ranging subject matters – whether she takes images from print out of context to create political collages, or portrays specific communities of people while manipulating the kinds of art-historical tropes designed to prescribe an individual’s status, and one that has long held a hegemony over the way we understand and view Western society.

“I believe in bearing witness in the simplest way photography does,” she says, and something about this answer makes me realise that the same drive behind her childhood project on Hine’s photographs exists in all of her work. It’s not just about making social issues and communities visible – it’s about doing it with empathy and in such a way that people can recognise their own communities.

Being and Having, first shown in New York, is made up of 13 closeup portraits featuring Opie and her lesbian friends wearing fake moustaches, sporting ‘tough-guy’ stares, and photographed against a bright, warm yellow backdrop (a visual device inspired by Hans Holbein the Younger): as a minority of the leather subculture, which was at the time dominated by men, they perform a version of extreme masculinity. Each photo is accompanied by a small metal plaque engraved with nicknames like ‘Chicken’, ‘Oso Bad’, ‘Pig Pen’, ‘Chief’, and Opie as ‘Bo’ (her alter ego as ‘a serial killer from the Midwest who’s a used aluminium-siding salesman’ was an early example of her interest in the role stereotypes play as much in the construction of personal identity as in the way judgements are formed). The series was made at a time when the AIDS epidemic had had a profound impact on the LGBTQ community – one that predominantly affected gay and bisexual men, and trans women: by 1995, one in 15 gay men in the US had died of an AIDS-related illness. It was also shown the year after queer theorist Judith Butler



Papa Bear from *Being and Having*, 1991. © the artist.
Courtesy Thomas Dane, London, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS

had published *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which the notion of gender as a performance entered academic, and then wider social discourse.

“In the early 90s, you didn’t see portraits being constructed in that way. There’s seduction in those portraits and that came from my own desire in relation to the leather community. It was a community that was really fun to be in and party with, and go to clubs where our bodies pressed against each other – and even though we were in an epidemic, there was an ability for us to feel cohesive and political within our visibility – there was a hotness to it,” she says. “Even for myself it was a radical move: I’m proud that I was brave enough to be out myself at that time period, and that I was able to confront all the fears around it in terms of my own internal homophobia.”

Having grown up in a conservative household and having experienced childhood abuse, Opie views the opportunity to explore her sexuality within a supportive community built on its members’ shared empathy with one another as allowing her to reconcile not only her own homosexuality in relation to her career but also to delve into the multifaceted nature of desire and how that’s bound up with the notion of identity.

The *Self-Portraits* are a series of three photographs, *Cutting* (1993), *Pervert* (1994) and *Nursing* (2004), all set against a cloth backdrop of richly coloured brocadelike material. In *Cutting*, Opie’s naked back is turned to the viewer. She faces a dark teal cloth printed with stylised cloth-bowls of fruit. Scratched into her back is a crude, childlike drawing of two women holding hands outside a house; a sun is peeping out from behind a cloud and two birds soar in parallel. Beads of blood pool in the sun’s rays, or drip from the chimney. The drawing speaks to the kind

of idealised life that a child might imagine, cutesy and happy, with sunshine. Opie cuts herself again in *Pervert*. Her face is hidden behind a gimp mask, each arm pierced from wrist to shoulder with a row of needles, the same ones used to carve out the word ‘Pervert’ in neat elegant script across her bare chest. She sits, as if patiently waiting, in front of a black and gold brocade curtain. And in *Nursing*, Opie is photographed breastfeeding her baby son; their gazes meet across the now pearly-thin scar on her chest, framed by red and gold drapery.

We talk about how people have reacted to these photos. “In different interviews, one question I *have* had a lot is, ‘Why did you mutilate yourself?’ I’ve always had a big problem with that terminology. People attach psychological issues onto those self-portraits. I always found that very off-putting and surprising, because this was a very specifically performed identity on my body in relationship to queer culture. You have to constantly remind people and reframe those images to a certain extent,” she says, and goes on to explain that the carving of ‘pervert’ was in reaction to how her own subcommunity of leather and s/M friends were viewed and othered by the wider LGBT community at the time.

Historically, visual symbolism in portraiture has played a role in building an identity, or narrative, for the sitter. Everything from the objects and materials that surrounded the subject to the clothes and demeanour of the sitter would describe their worldly position. In Italian and Northern European Renaissance portraiture, brocade, for example, a labour-intensive, dyed, woven silk fabric that was introduced via Venice from Byzantium in the fifteenth century, came to symbolise a certain kind of social status: only the wealthy and the



Self-Portrait / Pervert, 1994, c-print, 102 × 76 cm.
© the artist. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS



above *Untitled #10 (Surfers)*, 2003, c-print, 127 × 102 cm.
© the artist. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

facing page *Stephen*, 2009, c-print, 102 × 76 cm.
© the artist. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

REGEN PROJECTS



nobility were able to afford such a costly material, and consequently the fabric maintained a long status as a material that denoted a particular, aspirational class-structure. The material, used as a backdrop to frame *Self-Portraits*, both functioned to elevate and make visible the queer experience within a dominantly heteronormative society, and at the same time challenged ideas of what was 'socially acceptable' identity. The latter is perhaps more evident when a comparison is drawn between, for example, Domenico Ghirlandaio's 1488 painting *Giovanna Tornabuoni nee Albizzi*, in which the initial and emblem of the sitter's husband and his family are embroidered onto the shoulder of her clothing, and *Pervert*, where that form of insignia is replaced with the needles that identify Opie within the s/m family. What's more, the holding back of visibility, by the gimp mask worn by Opie, is offset not only by her naked torso and its inscription, but by the protective positioning of her hands clasped over her womb – a gesture symbolic of fertility or pregnancy in Renaissance painting, and in this context, one that challenged the assumption that lesbians in the s/m community couldn't also be, or hope to be mothers. A decade later, she photographed *Nursing*.

"Using art history as a reference is actually a way of figuring out how to be transgressive within your work while at the same hooking people into a language. For example, if I went into a documentary mode of photography in the 90s and took pictures of my friends in their rooms, those photos would be in a very specific position within that history of photography. But what does it mean to use a history of *painting* to look at a subject that is viewed as 'transgressive' or 'dangerous'? Referencing art history is a way of bringing the viewer in and getting them to look at the subject in a different way – or to be seduced even. My early subjects are thought of as abject or transgressive, but my photographic handling of them utterly does not do that."

That empathetic approach to framing her subjects, as well as her long-held interest in debunking cultural stereotypes, led Opie to explore other communities in series like *Surfers* (2003) and *High School Football* (2007–09). In the latter, teenage boys pose for portraits in their uniforms – a symbol of American hypermasculinity – or else

appear in landscapes of games in play. Here, Opie captures something beneath the surface of this gendered performance, one that is designed to conceal emotions or individuality: insecurity and awkwardness bely their stoic expressions. "High school footballers might have scared the shit out of me when I was in high school, because I was a chubby tomboy who wore glasses and was teased constantly by that group of boys. But that doesn't mean that I go back and make photographs that are pushing this heightened sense of masculinity. No, I bear witness to

who *they* are and who they stand before me. That has to count for something, because if we were constantly going off these stereotypes, how can we see people in any other way beyond that?"

To image something over and over again makes it more digestible to the public – so that subjects that are typically regarded as taboo are 'normalised'. That's what Susan Sontag says in the oft-quoted *On Photography* (1977). But she also reminds us that there are consequences to complete visibility: the risk of making the subject so ubiquitous that viewers can no longer empathise with it. Opie evades this in her work by putting into tension the relationship between the invisible and visible, knowing precisely what to reveal in order to hook a viewer in, and what to conceal in order to get the viewer to linger on her photographs, and enter into a visual discourse with her subject, from her recent politically focused work, to her social documentary of her own community and others of which she is not a part – all the

while fostering a sense of empathy and human connection. In the landscapes of *Icehouses* (2001) and *Surfers*, the horizon line fades so that land or sea becomes sky, interrupted only by the presence of tiny temporary fishing huts set up on the lake ice or the silhouettes of surfers waiting for the waves. Everything is going on underneath – you just can't see it. ar

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, has temporarily closed its gallery. Rhetorical Landscapes has been extended through 2 May, and can be found via this website: regenprojects.com/exhibitions/catherine-opie10