

# REGEN PROJECTS

Manders, Kerry. "Mentor/Protégée Friends." *T Magazine* (April 12, 2021) [ill.] [online]

**T** THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE



From left: **SAM RICHARDSON**, photographer and educator, 33; and **CATHERINE OPIE**, artist, 60. Photographed at Opie's studio in Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles, on March 5, 2021.

## MENTOR/PROTÉGÉE FRIENDS

Though they started off as teacher and student, Catherine Opie and Sam Richardson have forged a bond that transcends institutional hierarchies.

INTERVIEW BY KERRY MANDERS  
PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHERINE OPIE AND SAM RICHARDSON

April 12, 2021

**Catherine Opie:** I met Sam over a series of phone calls in 2018 when she was considering U.C.L.A. for grad school. I was the head of the photography program, and there were only three spots. When I look at a potential student's work, I want to see that they're having a conversation with ideas, and with the history of photography. Hopefully, I can be another voice in that conversation.

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**Sam Richardson:** Cathy was kind, open and very present. She asked me about myself and my practice, and we discovered we had a lot in common. I was introduced to her work as an undergrad, when a professor told me I had to go see [her 2008-09 retrospective](#) at the Guggenheim. I remember being overwhelmed by the honest self-representation in Cathy's "[Being and Having](#)" (1991), a group of 13 portraits of Cathy's friends in the queer community wearing fake mustaches. I felt both confronted and at home — it was the first time art made me cry.

**C.O.:** There are many photographers who eschew tenderness, who believe that you have to shock the viewer — often by creating derogatory images. Sam's work has an overall quality of humanity, and that's what I strongly believe in as an artist.

**S.R.:** I take portraits, primarily, which are really about collaboration. There are issues of community and identity, none of which are easy: All of it needs to be hashed out to make work that attempts not to be exploitative.

**C.O.:** We were able to bond about that.

**S.R.:** There's obviously an inherent hierarchy in our relationship: It's real; it's institutional, but Cathy dismantles that with her students. We had similar approaches, which minimized the power dynamic and facilitated a true friendship.

**C.O.:** I want to be helpful and creative. After critiques, I'd often sit with Sam and other students, have a glass of wine and smoke cigarettes: I *love* the art school cigarette, and I'm not allowed to smoke at home! My reputation is quite different from who I am as a person: I think people look at my early work, especially my self-portraits, and don't understand that I have a sense of humor, that I'm not totally serious.

**S.R.:** Our bond is not only a result of our queerness, though that's part of it. Queer artists share a certain perspective and language. It's not that we see the world identically, but there's a definite kinship.

**C.O.:** It's sometimes surprising to me that we still seem to have secret codes. We don't mean to write in invisible ink, but others still *aren't getting it*.

**S.R.:** The flip side is that queerness is not a monolith: There's no one set of signs or signals. When people question what queerness looks like in my work, I find it interesting and sometimes frustrating. What queerness looks and feels like does not have to be definitive, or even labeled as such, it just inherently is.

**C.O.:** Sam graduated in 2020, so there was an ending to our official mentorship that also wasn't really an ending because of the pandemic; we're not at the place I expected us to be right now, and that makes me feel responsible for her in a way. If not for Covid-19, we would have had her thesis show and celebrated her graduation; instead, I dropped champagne off at her place. I would normally have her over regularly for dinner; instead, she house-sits when I'm *not* there. There's an interesting intimacy you develop with someone who lives in your home and cares for your animals.

**S.R.:** I value our intergenerational friendship. She will always be someone I look to for guidance: I admire the work and the life she's built, as I'm still trying to figure that stuff out in my own way.

Interviews have been edited and condensed.

A version of this article appears in print on April 18, 2021, Page 88 of T Magazine with the headline: Mentor/Protégée Friends.