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CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK

# Finding a Lavender Thread Even in Catherine Opie’s Landscapes

A queer outlook suffuses the photographer’s wide-ranging works, from streetscapes and still lifes to Elizabeth Taylor’s closet.

In a photo Catherine Opie made on the set of her black-and-white film “The Modernist,” in 2016, the transgender protagonist played by Pig Pen prepares to torch the iconic midcentury Sheats-Goldstein Residence, designed by John Lautner. As Oscar Wilde wrote in a classic line, he is killing the thing he loves. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

**By Arthur Lubow**

Aug. 18, 2021

# REGEN PROJECTS

Poring over a new monograph of Catherine Opie's diverse body of photographs, which was published during Gay Pride Month, I found myself wondering as a gay man if anything ties her renowned images of lesbians in the Bay Area to her pictures of freeways in Los Angeles, ice fishing houses in Minnesota, high school football games in Texas, and Elizabeth Taylor's closets in Bel Air.

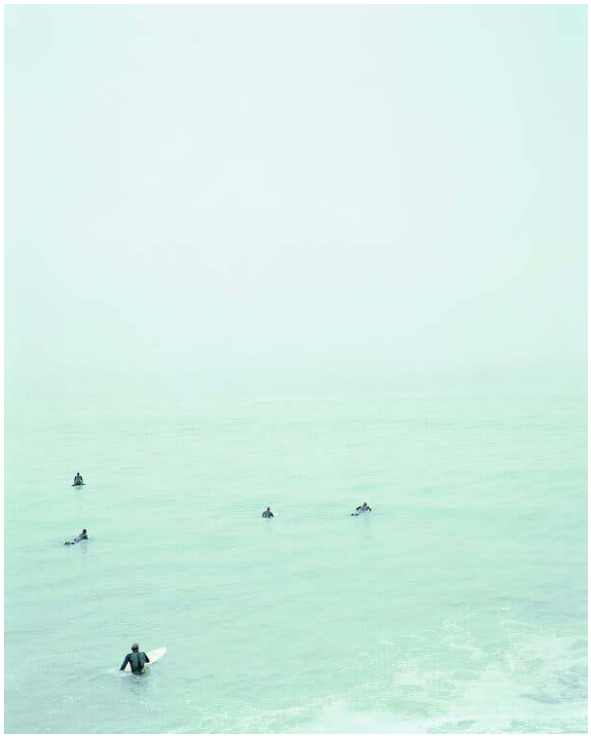
Is there such a thing as a gay or queer sensibility? And if so, is it the lavender thread running through an entire body of "straight" work by Opie, a lesbian who is the recently named chair of the department of art at the University of California, Los Angeles?

Being queer implies a disconnect with the traditional norms of heterosexuality. From an early age, a person whose libidinal impulses are out of sync with what has been stipulated as natural reads the world as a text that is written in a foreign language and needs to be decoded. The process of recognizing and assuming a more authentic identity doesn't erase the sense of estrangement, although that willed creation of a true self also lies at the heart of a queer sensibility, twinned with the residual longing to fit in by pretending to be what one is not.

"Jewelle & Diane, San Francisco, California," 1998. The photograph was part of a series Opie made travelling around the country visiting lesbian households. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

# REGEN PROJECTS

“Untitled #1 (Icehouses)“ (2001). Opie’s images show a community coming together in a forbidding environment. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund



“Untitled #4 (Surfers)“ (2009). Her photographs suggest a kind of family through shared affinities like surfing. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

Of course, this incongruity between what one is and what one is expected or required to be is not uniquely the property of gay people. August Sander in the early 20th century made portraits of Germans from all walks of life who were trying to live within the constraints of their social roles. Building on the pioneering pictures of the lesbian Claude Cahun and the bisexual Diane Arbus, Gillian Wearing in our time has addressed the presentation of self through the wearing of masks. But to agree that these are universal human issues doesn't deny that a queer person — and particularly a queer artist — will usually perceive them more pervasively, and with greater immediacy and urgency.

Beginning in the early '90s, Opie made her name with a series of portraits of Bay Area lesbians who engaged in sadomasochistic practices, a community to which she belonged. The most talked-about photos were her self-portraits: Opie leather-hooded and stripped to the waist, with metal needles running up and down her arms and the word "pervert," embellished by a leafy flourish, incised bloodily above her breasts; Opie nursing her son with the decade-old "pervert" scar still visible; and most poignantly, the earliest in the group — Opie's naked back, carved with a childlike stick drawing of two women holding hands in front of a house and a cloud that is partly obscuring the sun.

These self-portraits are carefully composed, placing Opie against opulent, deeply colored cloth backdrops with foliage patterns that resonate with the designs of her cuttings. "I knew I had to use aesthetics to talk about my community at that point in time, that there needed to be a different way to enter it beyond a documentary style," she said, in an interview in the monograph. "I was still documenting, but there's a formality there."

"Self-Portrait/Nursing" (2004). Opie achieved her dream of domesticity without surrendering her queer identity. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

Each of the portraits speaks to an element of what it means to be queer. “Self Portrait/Pervert” (1994) is a loud declaration that Opie will not conform to the proprieties of the prevailing society. Yet “Self Portrait/Cutting” (1993), which she made a year earlier in the aftermath of a failed relationship, testifies to her longing for the conventional dream of a loving domestic partnership. These conflicts are resolved in “Self Portrait/Nursing” (2004), which depicts Opie — who in the intervening decade has found another mate and a new home — nursing her infant son. The persistence of the scar, a visible sign of sexual otherness, indicates that she has achieved her goal without pretending to be someone she is not.

The self-portraits tackle head-on the formation of a queer identity. Portraits that established Opie’s reputation in the ’90s, of her lesbian and trans friends and of lesbian households in the United States, do so as well. But much of her output has been devoted to streetscapes, landscapes and still lifes. Produced using various camera formats and printing processes, what they share is what they lack: the presence of people.

In the ’90s, on early weekend mornings, Opie shot Los Angeles freeways devoid of traffic and Los Angeles mini-malls not yet open to shoppers. She photographed facades and doorways in the privileged precincts of Beverly Hills and Bel Air, where people go from their cars to their homes and rarely appear in public. Venturing away from her home turf, she portrayed icehouses built for fishermen on frozen lakes in northern Minnesota, overhead walkways in Minneapolis, and pedestrian-eye views of St. Louis, Chicago and New York’s Wall Street.

“Dyke” (1993). Portraits of Opie’s lesbian and trans friends established her reputation in the ’90s.
Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

"Mike and Sky" (1993). Opie's subjects are a trans couple. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

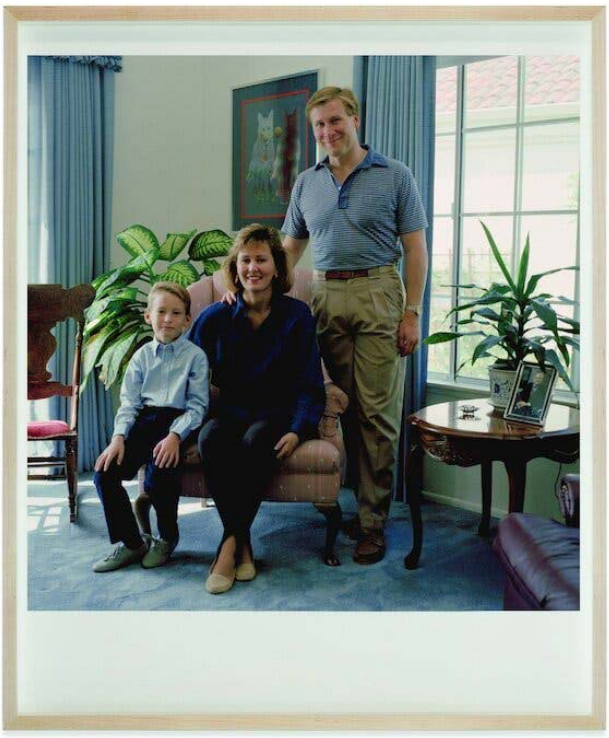
Catherine Opie, "Football Landscape #14 (Twentynine Palms vs. Big Bear, Twentynine Palms, CA)" (2008). When she does photograph people in the landscape, they are tiny figures dwarfed by their surroundings. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

When she did photograph people in the landscape, they were usually tiny: surfers paddling in hopes of catching a wave, high school football players competing on grassy fields. They remind me of the pictures Harry Callahan took in the '50s of his wife,

Eleanor, with their daughter, Barbara, standing small and isolated in Lincoln Park in Chicago. But Eleanor and Barbara were part of Callahan's nuclear family. The groups that Opie photographs have come together through shared affinities to form a community, just as her S&M friends had done in the Bay Area.

Forming a heterosexual family is so encouraged and expected that the process can seem to occur without conscious intervention. It is like floating down a rushing river. But the communities and partnerships that queer people forge require us to steer our boats deliberately and skillfully against the prevailing current. This is why, I think, Opie is drawn to the architecture of conduits, the systems through which people connect, as well as to the architecture that prevents people from connecting.

She documents affluent houses in Los Angeles that turn an exaggeratedly uncommunicative face to the street. Her portrait of the Dickason family, part of her master's degree thesis on a planned suburban community, demonstrates that the heterosexual family life unfolding within private houses can be just as performative as sadomasochistic rituals.



"Dickason Family Portrait," part of Opie's thesis project on a planned community in Valencia, Calif.
Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

"Untitled #3 (Freeways)" (1994). Opie highlights freeways as the structures that connect people — without including people themselves. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

On a higher rung of the social ladder, Opie in 2011 memorialized the Bel Air home of Elizabeth Taylor. Without ever photographing the actress, who died midway through this project, Opie captured Taylor by depicting her chosen trappings of clothes and décor. The pictures of Taylor's closets, with the garments carefully arranged by color and fabric, are surprisingly intimate. The new monograph juxtaposes an earlier photograph by Opie, titled "All My Sex Toys," with the jeweled scarlet-ribbon pins worn by Taylor, an early advocate for people with AIDS. In both instances, Opie was lifting her subjects out of the closet.

Attuned to how people interrelate, she is fascinated by the formal beauty of the concrete freeways that take Angelenos to and from their homes. She shot the freeways with a panoramic camera and made old-fashioned platinum prints — seeking, she said, to evoke the elegiac monumentality of the 19th-century photographers of Egyptian ruins, such as Maxime Du Camp. Her Minneapolis walkways aren't as swoopingly lovely, and the mini-malls even less so, but, like owners' manuals, they all illustrate ways that people might come together.

It is revealing that when Opie does include people or their idiosyncratic structures — the icehouses, surfers, football players — they are uniting in inhospitable settings. They are reaching out while pushing back.

"Untitled #1 (Elizabeth Taylor's Closet)" (2012). Part of a series that portrayed the star by examining her home, taste and self-presentation, without once depicting Taylor herself. Catherine Opie and Regen Projects, Lehmann Maupin, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Peder Lund

In "The Modernist" (2016), her first film, she looked at the cult of midcentury modernist houses in Los Angeles. The film's eponymous protagonist is played by her longtime friend and collaborator, Stosh Fila, a trans man known as Pig Pen. The Modernist builds models of iconic homes and then sets fire to the real ones. Midcentury modernism was an architectural movement born out of utopian optimism. It produced structures that today are trophy homes for the ultrarich. Although the buildings feature expanses of glass, thanks to their siting they are usually as private as the closed-off homes Opie photographed in Beverly Hills. The owners can look out at the city without anyone peering in at them. The residences are transparent citadels.

Obsessively loving these houses, The Modernist is consumed and tormented by that desire, until he feels compelled to destroy them. When I first saw the movie, I kept thinking of the famous line from Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol": "And all men kill the thing they love." In its conflicts, its irony and its yearning, it is a very queer sentiment.