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Body of Evidence

FOR HER SEARING WORK, CATHERINE OPIE GOES DEEP WITHIN. LINDA YABLONSKY REPORTS.

Catherine Opie proudly calls herself a pervert. In 1994, she even had the word carved into her ample chest, to make one of the most arresting self-portraits since Robert Mapplethorpe photographed himself with a bullwhip in his anus back in the '70s.

Opie's "Self-Portrait/Pervert," which anchors a 20-year survey of her photography coming to the Guggenheim Museum next month, gives her the look of court executioner for an empire of sexual deviance. In the picture, she sits topless in black leather chaps before an opulent swath of gold-and-black patterned drapery. Twenty-three 18-gauge steel pins are woven into the flesh of each arm; a black bondage hood conceals her face. "That's my Henry VIII/Holbein picture," says

Opie, 47, as affable and unflappable in person as her photographs are painstaking and provocative.

Sensational content combined with formal virtuosity has set Opie's work apart since her breakthrough at the 1995 Whitney Biennial. The sadomasochistic cutting and piercing that others might characterize as self-mutilation she refers to as "body modification." It's the term used by friends in a community of tattooed "leather dykes" whom Opie has portrayed with the dignity and tenderness she later gave to a group of California surfers whom she didn't know at all. That is the same photographer who rose before dawn to shoot the still-empty freeways and mini-malls of L.A., the mansions of Beverly Hills and the ice-fishing shacks of Minneapolis.

For what Opie calls her "urban work," she photographed the skyscrapers of cities like New York and Chicago as architectural Aphrodites, ethereal monuments not just to vernacular design but also to a brace of human social contracts.

"I work really hard!" she says with a hearty laugh when we meet in the studio that she and Julie Burleigh, her girlfriend of seven years, built for themselves in the yard behind their house. (Burleigh is a painter.) To get there, we have to pick our way past six chickens, three dogs and a cat. That wouldn't be so unusual in a rural village, of course, but Opie lives in South Central Los Angeles with her 6-year-old son, Oliver, and Burleigh's 28-year-old daughter.

A worktable and a treadmill share the nearly windowless studio. "I mix the joys of obesity with being incredibly fit," Opie says, laughing again. She trains five days a week and has been on a strict diet since last January, when she hit 250 pounds and a boy at Oliver's school asked if his mom was the fat one. "I'm determined to lose 50 pounds by my Guggenheim opening," she adds, sounding more grim.

Opie does work hard, almost compulsively. The Guggenheim show will contain an impressive range of documentary and portrait work, including "Being and Having," her 1990 series of 13 women sporting facial hair, and "In and Around Home," from 2004 and 2005, which portrays her Los Angeles neighborhood in natural light that, nonetheless, makes it seem slightly unreal. These, in turn, contrast starkly with her photos of the ice-fishing shacks and surfers, which are more like abstract studies of light and fog.

Small wonder, then, that Opie is one of very few contemporary female artists — certainly the first "out leather dyke from California," as she puts it — to earn a full-scale solo show at the Guggenheim. It's not ambition but curiosity, she says, that brought her to this point: "I graduated high school with a 1.8 grade average. Literally, the most likely to fail."

Opie spent her first 13 years in Ohio, where her father worked for OP-Craft, a family business that became hugely profitable after he helped to invent vacuum-form packaging. When Opie's grandfather sold the company for his own benefit, her father cut and ran, taking his family to a town near San Diego, where he made a new fortune in real estate before divorcing her mother and moving away.

It was on her ninth birthday that Opie got her first camera, and at 16, with money from babysitting, she built her own darkroom. Her first pictures, black-and-white portraits of her smiling parents, are now sitting in her studio. They

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betray no sign that the family relations would ever become strained. Yet five years ago, after Opie sided with her brother Rob — in court — over a dispute with their father, the father disappeared and has never spoken to her again. “I’ve cried over my dad a lot,” Opie says. He accepted her homosexuality more readily than her mother, she notes, though her mother was the one who stood by her desire to be an artist.

Still, her mother cried when she saw “Self-Portrait/Pervert” shortly before it appeared at the 1995 biennial. “That was a terrifying experience,” Opie says. “I didn’t think about how that photograph would be interpreted outside the queer community.”

“Pervert” was actually a response to an anti-S-and-M bias that Opie feels emerged among gays and lesbians during a 1993 march on Washington. “I’m a warrior, and I’m a really beautiful warrior, and I’m a big woman, and I’m making a picture that’s going to be so beautiful that you can’t stop looking at it,” she recalls thinking at the time. “And then I never made a self-portrait again, until I had Oliver.” She turns to gaze at “Self-Portrait/Nursing,” hanging on the wall. In it, she is breast-feeding her 1-year-old son, the scars on her chest faded but visible. Opie, who also studied early childhood education, can’t remember not wanting to be a mother.

At 40, she asked a friend to donate the sperm, and she got pregnant on the sixth try. “For me, having a baby was partly about that intense body thing,” she says, referring to her S-and-M activity. “I wanted to take my body back to that extreme of exhilaration and pain.” The whipping, cutting and piercing make her feel more alive, she says, and in control. “It never involved sex.” The S-and-M community itself she calls supportive and loving. Therapists, she adds, never helped as much. “You explore things in an incredibly safe environment in which you get to say, finally, ‘No, stop.’ And if you have to release and cry, there’s someone there to hold you.”

These days, Opie’s responsibilities keep her far from that scene. But she and Burleigh have an understanding that allows her, on rare occasion, “to let people play-pierce me” with hypodermic needles. In 1999, she published a suite of seven photogravures documenting the practice for “O,” her answer to Mapplethorpe’s notorious “X Portfolio” of gay male bondage and domination. “This is more feminine,” she says. “Quieter.” In fact, says Susan Inglett, the portfolio’s publisher, the etchings “border on romantic — if one can call bondage romantic.”

Opie’s experience with S-and-M goes back to the early 1980s, when she moved to San Francisco to attend the Art Institute and began dating a player in the fetish world. “I was going to art school, working the lobster shift in a residence hotel and submitting photographs to On Our



Visual feast Opie’s work, clockwise from left: “Self-Portrait/Nursing,” 2004; “Football Landscape #8 (Crenshaw vs. Jefferson, Los Angeles, CA),” 2007; “Untitled #14,” from the 1997 “Mini-Mall” series.



Backs, but I never allowed the queer work to be my artwork,” she says. When friends started dying of AIDS, she joined Act Up and Queer Nation, whose politics of visibility led her to show more personal work. Soon she was inventing herself as a documentary photographer in the Walker Evans mold. For her graduate thesis, she made an exhaustive study of the planned communities of Valencia, outside Los Angeles.

“From early on, I wanted to create a language that showed how complex the idea of community really is, how we categorize who we are as human beings in relation to places we live,” she says, sounding a bit like the photography professor that she now is, in U.C.L.A.’s graduate art department. Her 1995 photographs of Beverly Hills and Bel Air homes aren’t so different, she says, from her portraits of the S-and-M community. “They’re both about the notion of the facade, and body modification is as much of a facade as architecture.”

Yet her shifts from fetish portraits to freeways and landscapes have confused both critics and aficionados. In fact, it isn’t easy to understand Opie’s “queer” work in the context of her urban skyways and surfers. She is hoping the Guggenheim show will help close the gap.

“Cathy’s a kind of diplomat — a community builder, or a teacher,” says Jennifer Blessing, who curated the Guggenheim show. Opie calls herself a wanderer who likes a sense of home. In 1998, for example, she drove an RV across

the country to photograph lesbian families for a series called “Domestic.” Most recently, she traveled to Louisiana and elsewhere to shoot high school football players.

“I didn’t know if I wanted to be a social documentary photographer anymore,” she says. She had made a trip last year to visit Burleigh’s family in Louisiana. “All of Julie’s nephews play football, so I started going to the high school games and fell in love with the lighting and the idea of the field as a stage of Americana. I love looking at these young faces and wondering who they’ll become. And what it means to be masculine.” Her portraits of these budding jocks capture both the innocence and the arrogance of her subjects with an unusual degree of intimacy.

Of all her portrait subjects, Opie has worked most often with Ron Athey, an H.I.V.-positive performance artist who is nearly covered in magnificent tattoos and routinely pushes the outer limits of acceptable, like defecating a strand of pearls. “I think she’s a purist,” Athey says. “She only does what she’s into.”

These days, Opie is into digital photography, thanks to her 39-megapixel Hasselblad H2. She recently took it to Alaska, where she shot 1,800 pictures in 12 days, extraordinarily detailed panoramas that seem to turn the tables on her edgiest portraits and extend her repertory into Ansel Adams territory. As Opie says about her S-and-M practice today: “I’ve worn out any desire for being a bottom. If I play now, I’m the top.” ■

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