

Feeney, Mark, "Opie's Shining Light," The Boston Globe, April 16, 2011

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Opie's shining light

Photographer's sunrises and sunsets are almost as spectacular as being there

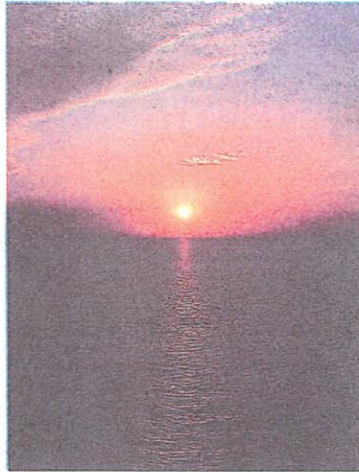
By Mark Feeney
GLOBE STAFF

What is it about Catherine Opie and water? Her 2008 mid-career retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum had many fine things in it, but none finer than two water-related series, on surfers and icehouses. Opie has done series on everything from her South-Central Los Angeles neighborhood and life in the gay community to mini-malls and Wall Street. Somehow, though, nothing quite brings out her gift for sumptuous clarity as does a certain odorless, tasteless, colorless compound.

"Catherine Opie: Empty and Full," which runs at the Institute of Contemporary Art through Sept. 5, consists of a brilliantly deadpan pairing of series that uses this affinity for water both as visual foil and for its own sake. It's a pairing that takes in nature and culture, sea and land, absence and presence, isolation and society. That's an awful lot of weight to put on 45 photographs, but Opie is nothing if not an artist of strength and sweep.

Half of the show consists of images Opie took during an 11-day voyage on a container ship from Korea to California. The other half consists of images taken at public assemblies throughout the United States: protest marches, political rallies, Barack Obama's inauguration, a Boy Scout jamboree, a women's music festival.

The ocean pictures encircle the assembly ones, underscoring the interplay between the two very different subjects. Which are empty, though, and which full? True, the assembly pictures are populated, as the ocean pictures are not. Yet recall such phrases as "empty rhetoric" and "empty gestures." (The political events span the spectrum, from Tea Party to pro-immigrant, so the dismissiveness of those phrases is not necessarily partisan.) Conversely, what subject on this



PHOTOS BY CATHERINE OPIE

Catherine Opie's "Sunrise #1" (left) and "Sunset #1" at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

CATHERINE OPIE: Empty and Full
At: the Institute of Contemporary Art, 100 North-
ern Ave., through Sept. 5.
Call 617-478-3100 or go to
www.icaboston.org.

water-covered planet is richer, denser, and, yes, fuller than the ocean?

In an interview with chief ICA curator Helen Molesworth that appears in the show's catalog, Opie speaks of her discomfort photographing crowds. The feeling is artistic as well as physical. "Everything is out of control in these demonstration photographs," she laments. Or is it? Notice how an anti-Bush poster in two peace march photos sits smack in the center of each image, like a visual pivot. A card bearing the famous Shepard Fairey image of Obama serves a similar function in an inauguration photo.

What stands out isn't the individuals, perhaps. The people on the right don't look all that different from the people on the left. For that matter, the Boy Scouts' tents aren't all that different from those at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. What's most distinctive is the ubiquity of text: on badges, caps, signs, placards, buttons, T-shirts. Words in these pictures are as common as waves in the ocean ones. In some ways, this verbal presence matters more than that of people does.

The contrast with the ocean pictures — Opie calls the series "Twelve Miles to the Horizon" — could hardly be more pronounced. Each day, she took photographs of the horizon at sunrise and sunset. "The biggest cliché in photography is sunrise and sunset," she tells Molesworth. "I wanted to play with that but also make something that was time-based. I like that time is marked by each sunrise and sunset whether or not you actually see it." You can't see

some of them because of the frequent presence of clouds, water in a different state.

The obvious comparison is with Hiroshi Sugimoto's "Seascapes" series — except that those photographs are black and white and generally long exposures. With Opie, we get an instant captured — and profoundly beautiful color. Sugimoto dissolves time in space. Opie monumentalizes it.

I said earlier that water is colorless, which means it takes on the color of its surroundings. Opie does not waste this opportunity. Along with a documentarian's intent, she has an artist's eye. That is to say, although there are no painterly effects in her photographs, no fussiness or stylization, she invariably manages to present subtle wonders within the frame.

"Leaving Busan," for example, the first image in the series, works on one level as a straightforward recording of a section of a working port. Visible are cranes, containers, a freighter.

Also visible is a progression of tonalities in the key of blue: light blue sky, grayish-blue granite, the cornflower blue of the containers, the deep blue of the dock's safety guards, the even deeper blue of the water. That set of blues pales when compared to the luxuriant, almost emurpled blue of "Sunset #5." Yves Klein had his trademark International Klein Blue. "How blue can you get?" B.B. King famously sang. Here is one answer. Call it Oceanic Opie Blue.

"I'm very interested in the language of photography in relationship to painting," Opie says in the catalog interview. In a couple of the images, a bit of the ship or its cargo is visible. Otherwise, there is nothing to see but the immensity of ocean and sky. The viewer fastens upon painting associations as a way to deal with the overwhelming singularity of the setting. The delicate sfumato of "Sunrise #4" — it's like a mesmerizing scrim — could be part of a color-field painting. "Sunset #1" is very Turner. "Sunset #9" has a Gauguin palette, though Polynesia is (literally) an ocean away.

The size of these pictures is so important to their success. Most of the assembly images are 18 inches by 24 inches or 16 inches by 24 inches. The sunrises and sunsets are 50 inches by 37 1/2 inches. Size gives a sense of detail (whitecaps here, glints of surface reflection there). It gives some small (very small!) sense of scale. Most important, their size lends these pictures a real presence. Size gives their beauty an additional, perhaps even necessary element, sheer formidability. Their size also makes them seem like windows, which encourages the illusion of looking out on Boston Harbor: part of another ocean and site of the original Tea Party — empty and full cinched together, as it were, and come full circle.

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