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Football and art collide at LACMA [Updated]

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Well-known for her documentary photography, Catherine Opie has turned her introspective lens to the all-American pastime of high school football in her most recent collection: "Catherine Opie: Figure and Landscape" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The Los Angeles-based artist became fascinated by the culture of the sport as it relates to the American landscape and the idea of identity after attending several of her nephews' practices and games in Louisiana a few years ago. "The team becomes family and a community especially during a recession," Opie said. "People look at these games as a place to connect to others and figure out — where do we belong?"

For some parts of the country, namely the South, football is not just a sport; it's a way of life, a religion of sorts. Opie herself grew up in Ohio where everyone, it seems, wanted to be a football player.

Her series of photos examines the gender identity of adolescent boys and masculinity as they transition to manhood. "It's another chapter in her ongoing exploration of how gender constitutes identity and being part of a group within society can create or limit opportunities for shaping one's life," said Britt Salvesen, curator and department head of the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department at LACMA.

"We as a society think of high school football players as not being vulnerable," Opie said. "They are 'the jocks' or 'the popular kids.' We load ideas on them as to who they are or should be."

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Opie wanted to break down that stereotype and capture the vulnerable side of that age group. Two examples: "Josh" whose stance typifies the stereotypical tough guy with intense eyes, bulging shoulder pads and six-pack abs, and "Adam," who expresses both a childlike innocence and teenage insecurity in a black T-shirt and tousled hair combed forward.

Since 2007 she has shot hundreds of portraits of enthusiastic football players and moments in between plays across seven states including Alaska, California, Louisiana and Texas. The background of the large color images on display subtly reveal the natural landscape of particular regions, such as the tall pines of Alaska or

palm trees in Hawaii. Many photos are from the California desert town of Twentynine Palms. The sense of community there plays a vital role as it is home to the United States Marine Corps largest base and numerous players have parents stationed overseas. "For many of those young men it's an uncertain time so the team framework is so meaningful," said Salvesen.

For many who don't get offered a college scholarship, their only viable option is to enlist in the military. A few of the players Opie photographed during the three year project have been killed in Iraq.

"The same way AIDS devastated the gay and lesbian community, war is devastating this generation," said Opie, who spent the late '80s and '90s documenting the AIDS epidemic and other political and social issues affecting the gay population.

Included in the 40-piece collection, which is installed next to the Thomas Eakins "Manly Pursuits" show, are a group of landscape photographs and a series of surfer images. To celebrate the spirit of the exhibition, which runs through Oct. 17, the Crenshaw High School marching band will be performing in the plaza at LACMA on Sept. 24 from 5-8 p.m. [**Update:** The date and place for the Crenshaw High School marching band performance have changed; it will take place at 5 p.m. Sept. 21, starting at LACMA's park amphitheater.]

By Liesl Bradner

Images: Top, Football landscape (Waianae vs. Leilehua, Waianae, Hawaii) 2009; right, "David, Austin & Bryant" 2007; bottom left, "Adam" 2007.



Credit : collection of the artist, Catherine Opie. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles