

# CATHERINE OPIE

ACROSS DIVERSE SUBJECT MATTER, THE PHOTOGRAPHER  
KEEPS THE FOCUS ON THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR EMPATHY

BY ERIC BRYANT



WHEN I ARRIVED for my visit last fall, Catherine Opie was in her living room with friends, choosing favorites from a group of her portraits of the swimmer Diana Nyad, taken after her recent attempt to navigate the waters between Cuba and Florida. The pictures would soon appear in the *New York Times Magazine*, to which the photographer contributes when she can find time. The magazine's editor, Hugo Lindgren, noted on his blog that he became interested in the athlete only after seeing Opie's riveting images of her longtime friend's jellyfish-stung body. "Her photographs have a novelistic depth that is hard to describe but easy to experience," Lindgren wrote. Indeed, the artist's hallmark is her ability to find individuality in, and elicit empathy for, subjects who would be rendered off-puttingly exotic or numbingly familiar by less talented photographers.

Sitting in the casual atmosphere of the Craftsman-style home Opie shares with her partner of more than 10 years, Julie Burleigh, their son, and three dogs, the photographer is clearly enjoying the lively discussion. When I arrive, however, the 50-year-old Opie is eager to move to the separate backyard structure that functions as her workspace. There she amiably recounts the trajectory of her career as she shows off her studio's two large rooms, one used for shooting portraits, and the other for printing—she makes nearly all her own prints. Because so much of her work is now shot on location, Opie uses the portrait studio

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Catherine Opie working on "Twelve Miles to the Horizon," a 2009 series shot while traveling by ship in the Pacific. Opposite: *Untitled* #9, 2003, from the "Surfers" series.

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more often to display and edit series that she is preparing for a show or a book. During my visit, the walls were arrayed with pictures from a six-week fellowship in New Zealand, including a fuzzy shot of a stormy sea next to a portrait of an intense young woman. “Throwing the focus out is a new gesture. I haven’t done that before,” Opie explains, “so I am trying to live with it and just see how I feel about it. I think the blurry landscape in relation to the portrait does something interesting.”

Since achieving international acclaim in the early '90s, Opie has produced a remarkably varied body of work. Whether capturing the distinctive architecture of various American cities, celebrating the marginalized in queer culture, or finding grace in California’s freeways, she produces thoughtful and cohesive series, each one standing as a discrete entity. Despite the diversity, however, a number of currents run throughout her career.

One unifying force is Opie’s deep engagement with the history of photography; references to it pepper her entire oeuvre. Her “In and Around Home” series, from 2004, one of the most powerful photographic documents of the last decade, mixes pictures of daily life at her house and in her neighborhood with Polaroids of news reports on television. When a reader flips through the series in book form, the crisp, casual snapshots, providing a direct and utterly honest window into the real life of one family, stand in counterpoint to the grainy instant pictures of politicians that feel so artificial and detached. The Polaroids are also



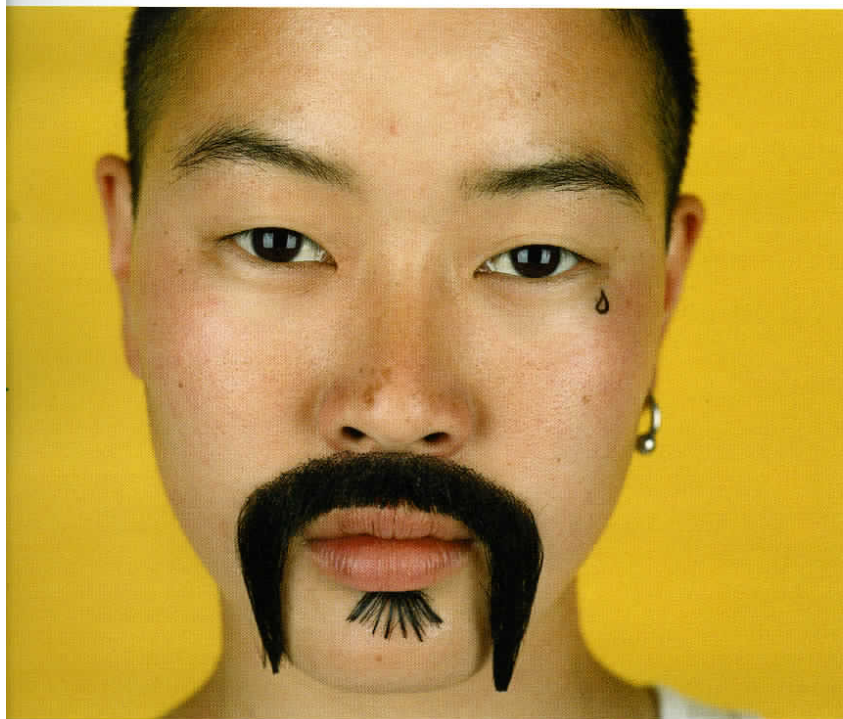
From top: *Oliver in a Tutu*, 2004, from the “In and Around Home” series, features the photographer’s son and in the backyard her partner, Julie; the green building is Opie’s studio. *Chicken*, 1991, from the early series “Being and Having.”

a reference to Robert Heinecken, who founded the photography department at the University of California, Los Angeles, where Opie teaches, and who captured images of Ronald Reagan on TV by the same method in the 1980s.

The “Inauguration” series, published in book form last fall, was made, Opie says, “in direct conversation with William Eggleston’s ‘Election Eve.’” The latter presents banal landscapes shot in Georgia just before Jimmy Carter’s election. Opie, who has always treated politics as an

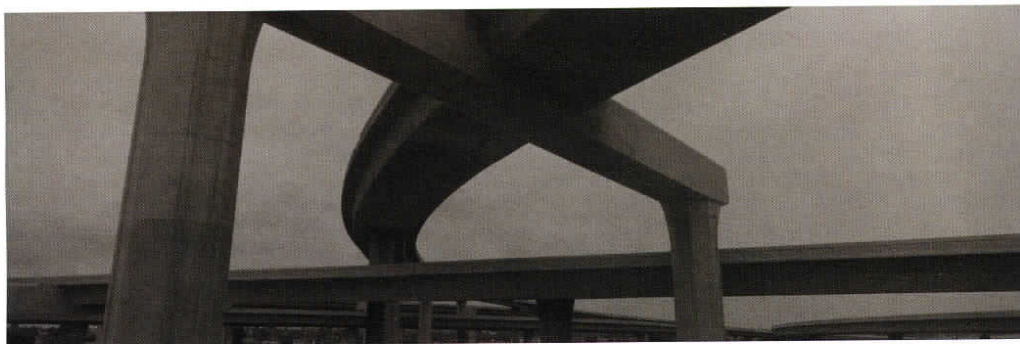
intensely personal activity in her work, here chose to photograph ordinary people, eschewing access to exclusive locations. Opie’s subject thus becomes the common person’s reaction to the 2009 inauguration rather than the grand event itself. She shows, for instance, citizens huddled at the edge of a patchy lawn, watching Obama on one of the jumbo screens set up along the Washington Mall, while the Capitol sits in the distance. Opie knew what she wanted in the images and worked for three days to capture the narrative from anticipation through aftereffects.

By contrast, “High School Football” was shot during the course of three years, evolving as she recorded games in seven states. The series—which will be exhibited on the East Coast for the first time since it was completed in a show opening March 10 at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, in New York—started during a visit with her partner’s family in Louisiana. “We were going to this small town for 10 days. I am a very methodical worker, I just cannot be idle for that long,” says Opie. “So I asked my nephew to ask his coach if I could shoot the football team at practice. I



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From top: *Untitled #7*, 1994, from the "Freeways" series; Opie's portraits of the athlete Diana Nyad, taken just after her attempt to swim from Cuba to Florida last year, appeared last fall in the *New York Times Magazine*.



was wondering what it was like for teammates to hit each other—that kind of aggression, what does it look like?"

Eventually she shifted the focus to the games, often seen in the middle distance. The emphasis is on the arena of play rather than the action on the field. "The stadium is a special kind of American landscape," Opie observes. "On a fall Friday night in any small town, you can see a glow in the distance and you know that is where a game is being played." (A few years earlier, she took a similarly unorthodox approach when shooting Southern California surfers on calm waters: The distant subjects are seen as little specks bobbing in a vast sea rather than as heroes riding the waves.) The football series also includes portraits of players. Each shows an individual, not a team representative or a stand-in for some type. "Over time I started thinking about

these young men, who us queers once feared, and I became touched by their vulnerability," says Opie. "They grew up during wartime, and football is like training soldiers. I wanted to say, 'Stand before me and I will bear witness.'"

The desire to create a dignified representation of the individual and, by extension, a humanistic depiction of the communities and physical spaces we construct around us, permeates Opie's diverse body of work. That has been a primary characteristic since her first gallery show at Regen Projects, in Los Angeles, in 1993, where she exhibited portraits of her lesbian and gay friends posed in front of brightly colored backgrounds, looking proud and confident. "I was so angry and sad. Friends were dying, and then the gay community itself was marginalizing us at the March on Washington, saying, 'Those leather people

are perverts,'" Opie recalls. "I wanted to make something defiant, in the same spirit as the portraits of friends. I made *Self Portrait/Pervert*. I just said, 'I am going to be Henry the Eighth.' I put on a leather mask and stuck needles in my arms like armor and said, 'I will wear my identity on my chest.' As I was doing it, I thought: I am fucked. I will never get a teaching job."

But events took an unexpected turn. The collector Peter Norton walked into that first group show—which also featured Toba Khedoori, Jennifer Pastor, and Frances Stark—and bought all of Opie's photos. "Stuart Regen then took me for a walk around the block and asked if I would work with the gallery." Regen is still her primary representation; in New York, she just joined Mitchell-Innes & Nash; and in London, she shows at Stephen Friedman.

When Norton sold part of his collection at Christie's last November, his print of *Pervert*, with its overt S-and-M theme, earned \$104,500, setting a new auction record for Opie.



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*Football  
Landscape #9  
(Crenshaw vs.  
Jefferson, Los  
Angeles, CA),  
2007.*

At the time of her first show, at Regen, Opie worked at the University of California, Irvine, first designing and then running its darkrooms. She had earned her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute just a few years earlier, followed by an MFA from CalArts. “San Francisco gave me technique and a work ethic—I had to have 15 prints every week for critique; my students have 10 prints every other week, and they think I work them very hard,” says Opie. “CalArts allowed me to shape a language around my practice. It was more conceptually driven. I was studying with Allan Sekula, who was rewriting ideas about the documentary practice. At San Francisco, I came out of a John Szarkowski–influenced school of training, with people like Hank Wessel.”

After signing with Regen, Opie became afraid that the portraits’ success would typecast her and thus prevent her from doing other kinds of work. A couple of years earlier she had had a solo exhibition of cityscapes, at the nonprofit Beyond Baroque, in Venice, that documented the gentrification of MacArthur Park. So after the gay portraits, she embarked on two new and very different series of landscapes: The panoramic black-and-white “Freeways” features soaring overpasses in moody gray tones, and “Mini-malls” records the carved-out corners of commercial space that dot Southern California. The “Freeways” were included in her solo gallery show at New York’s Jay Gorney Modern Art, in 1996, and they solidified her reputation both as an artist with a varied practice and as a Los Angeles artist.

Opie doesn’t shy away from the L.A.–artist label, which is enhanced by the fact that she has held a tenured position

at UCLA for a decade. But the description isn’t entirely complete. “Mini-malls” came to be part of the larger “American Cities” series, which focuses on the urban sprawl of St. Louis and the office towers of New York’s Wall Street area, among other locales. Her “1999” series grew out of a cross-country road trip with the artist Daphne Fitzpatrick, who she was dating at the time. And there were the travels to countless football games. Such treks are part of a curious nature that always sets her in search of something different.

At the time of my visit, she was getting ready to set up her studio to edit yet another unexpected series: several thousand images of the late Elizabeth Taylor’s house and possessions. The photographer and the film star employed the same accountant, who had repeatedly offered to arrange a shoot. “I kept telling him, ‘I don’t do celebrity,’” Opie recalls. “But after ‘Inauguration,’ I thought it would be interesting to extend that conversation with Eggleston’s work to the pictures he made at Graceland. I started to think of celebrity shoots as portraits of something other than the celebrities themselves.” Opie arranged to go to the house and photograph Taylor’s surroundings, without her present, and planned to edit the photos later with the actress. She was in the middle of the project when Taylor died, but the actress’s assistant asked her to continue until Christie’s began to remove Taylor’s possessions for its sale. “It has become a very complicated body of work,” says the photographer. “It had to be about celebrity—but done in a non-gawking way, about Taylor the person as well. It is important to me to preserve her dignity.” ■