



UNTITLED #2 (YOSEMITE VALLEY), 2015

Queer and Loathing

She's far from the '90s version of herself documenting the LGBT BDSM communities in Old Masters-style portraits, but today's Catherine Opie is as politically conscious as ever – even when she's photographing national parks. She talks to CHRISTINA KO

CATHERINE OPIE is best known as a portrait photographer, but what she has in fact been doing all along is documenting landscapes. This isn't a reference to her recent show at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in Hong Kong – *So long as they are wild*, a series of photographs of Yosemite National Park displayed alongside debut sculptural works that resemble tree stumps. It's the connective thread throughout most of her oeuvre, which traverses various tropes of Americana, and the literal and sociopolitical landscapes of the times.

Not that there's a necessity to define her work. "It's not that interesting to be a singular identity. It's just not. We're much more complicated as human beings," the artist says. "But people want binaries. People are very comfortable with binaries."

It's this idea of categorisation that drove Opie's early work, exceedingly formal portraiture resembling Renaissance paintings that focused on friends of hers within the LGBTQ community. Two of her best-known pieces, created in 1993 and '94, are titled *Self-Portrait/Cutting* and *Self-Portrait/Pervert* respectively. The former shows Opie's nude back, with a childlike drawing of a happy family (two skirts, no pants) freshly

etched on to her skin by knife. The latter displays her front, the word "pervert" carved in the same manner above her breasts, a black leather mask obscuring her face and metal pins protruding from each arm.

Those were done in the days of marginalisation, of the Aids epidemic, when being gay meant being a pervert meant having Aids. "When I started making the work early on, it was literally creating unbelievably dignified images of my own community that didn't objectify the body, but just was about being," she explains.

And while the subjects have changed – there are the friends, still, but Opie also shoots strangers, famous people, for art, for fashion campaigns and more – the purpose is similar. "For me, portraiture is utterly connected to creating history. You always want to go see a da Vinci show, even though you don't know who those people

are. There's something in it that compels you to spend time with [these] people; there's a humanistic shared relationship in it and that's what I'm trying to do, a little bit."

Opie was born in Ohio and lives now in Los Angeles. She may have started her career as part of a BDSM community and telling their stories both sexual and political, but somewhere along the line, she too found the family for which she longed, the one represented in her early self-portrait. She made tenure at UCLA as a professor and joined the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Her work has been shown at the Guggenheim. She married artist Julie Burleigh and had a son, Oliver (he's the one who likes fashion, and pushes his mother to take on campaigns for the likes of Balenciaga and Rodarte. "For the swag," Opie says, chuckling and shaking her head like any soccer mom would.) She shot another self-portrait in 2012, this time breastfeeding Oliver, the pervert scar just faintly visible along her collarbone. She's – to borrow her favourite adverb – utterly establishment.

Has she softened? Does she still feel an urgency to represent her community? It's a question that isn't exactly appropriate, but is oft posed. "A burden, no, but [there's an] expectation sometimes. [Artist] Catherine Lord was presenting her really important queer anthology of artwork at a conference and this one person raised a hand and was like, 'Why do you think an artist like Catherine Opie isn't radical any



SELF-PORTRAIT/PERVERT, 1994.
OPPOSITE: TREE, 2015;
CATHERINE OPIE

more? Why does she make all the other work she makes? And [Lord] was like, are you kidding me?

"It's interesting because I think there's an expectation of always being utterly radical, but I don't think anybody can be utterly radical their entire lives. I need to find a place of internal thought as well. To only build one body of work in relationship to a queer politic – I guess it would be important, but why not do it all?"

So long as they are wild. Opie explains, is just as political as a mutilated masochist in a leather mask. "The exhibition is about Yosemite, which is an iconic California place. It's a natural Disneyland, it's one of the places that everybody

around the world goes to," she says. "And with this exhibition I'm really asking a lot of hard questions around nature photography, so I'm looking at it through a feminist lens, kind of taking the history of Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins, and flipping it, so to speak, on the side for us to reimagine the landscape both through the sublime and the ethereal, and the landscape body. And so that's a little bit of play versus the grandiose landscape that's connoted to masculinity in relation to representation."

This is manifested in the very obvious – a cliff visually bisected by a gushing waterfall bears more than a passing resemblance to the female anatomy – but also in the more amorphous, such as a similar scene captured completely out of focus, what Opie sees as the antithesis to the crisp and clear gold standards popularised by Adams and Watkins.

"For me there's no difference from ideas of landscape, body and architecture. All of that has coalesced as subject throughout



my years as an artist," she says. "I read the body in relationship to a site of architecture as well. The body is a built environment, to a certain extent.

"But I know when I give public lectures there's always that hand that goes up with, 'I don't get the *American Cities* [series]. Your portraits are so much better.'" That's a reference to stark cityscapes she's done of places such as New York or Chicago, generally devoid of people.

To understand how *American Cities* could come from the same artistic starting point as, say, her early '90s *Portraits*, one need look no further than *High School Football*, which features a quintessential team in Louisiana doing what they do, captured in a mixture of classic portraiture and wide-angle shots of the environment. They were shot during a family trip to Opie's wife's hometown of Church Point, Louisiana. "I called up my nephew and was just like, 'Can I come along and photograph your football practice?' Because I just needed something to do. And then it turned into really this amazing investigation of ideas around American landscape.

"Portraits are portraits, but the ones on the field are landscapes, which is also a different way

of looking at sports photography. It's not the zoom lens with the action. It's just the figures within the landscape. And everywhere you go in America, there's always the high-school football field. And so it was an extension of American identity in the same way of doing a body of work like *Domestic*, where I got an RV and went around for three-and-a-half months photographing lesbians."

This November, Lehmann Maupin will show *The Modernist* in its New York salon, which originally played at Regen Projects in Los Angeles at the beginning of 2018. It's a video work, based on 800 images stitched together, about a character (played by Opie's friend Pig Pen) obsessed with mid-century modern architecture who plans to set fire to Hollywood homes most representative of his unattainable dream.

"Julie and I recently went to New York and we were going through exhibitions, and one of my really dear friends is [Robert] Gober, and he had a really beautiful exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery and I was looking at the work and thinking about the utter vulnerability and tenderness in it," Opie says. "And then as we were roaming Chelsea we realised that the work wasn't overtly political, it was more about ideas of thoughtfulness and humanity and tenderness. And I thought that was very interesting because it's very different from the kind of work that was being done in the '90s. And that we're not in the middle of the Aids crisis, but we're in the middle of another

crisis, where it's important for us in terms of being thoughtful. And *The Modernist* does that. That piece looks on the level of talking about Trump without saying Trump's name once. But it's a critique of our times right now.

"I think the queer and trans communities are in trouble. I mean, the hate crimes have just come back with a vengeance for everybody. Even the other day, I was just walking down the street, and these young boys rolled down the window and yelled 'dyke' at me, and that hasn't happened in years. I think it's really damaging, what has happened with this administration. It's really harming a lot of people. And it's [not just the LGBTQ community, it's] all 'the other'. It's utterly white supremacy. There's no other language for it, just extreme right-wing Christianity and white supremacy." ■

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