

Pivotal: Highlights from the Collection  
Orange County Museum of Art  
October 7 – December 31, 2017  
ARTIST INFORMATION

**Catherine Opie**

Born 1961 (Sandusky, Ohio), works in Los Angeles, CA

Since the late 1980s, Catherine Opie has explored the themes of community and identity in her photography. She received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1985 and her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in 1988. By the early 1990s, Opie began creating bodies of work that challenge heteronormative social standards by documenting and representing a diverse spectrum of gender identifications and appearances. In the 1991 series of portraits entitled "*Being and Having*," Opie photographed close-ups of thirteen lesbian women wearing fake facial hair in an attempt to visually hybridize signifiers of femininity and masculinity. In the image *Bo*, Opie shows herself with a fake mustache. Drawing on formal techniques of both art historical portraiture and documentary photography, she imbues established modes of representation with subjects and themes traditionally excluded from conventional imagery.

# Opie, Catherine

"I'm interested in community, how it's defined, how it looks."

Over the past twelve years, Catherine Opie has created what might be viewed as separate bodies of photographic work: portraits, domestic studies, urban landscapes, and architectural facades. However, considered together, they are linked by her interest in the ways communities are defined and visualized within contemporary culture. Whether photographing a subgroup of people and the way those individuals reveal themselves through their clothing and body markings, or looking at a city through its buildings, monuments, and social configurations, Opie explores the language of communities and pictures their identities in strong documents of our time.

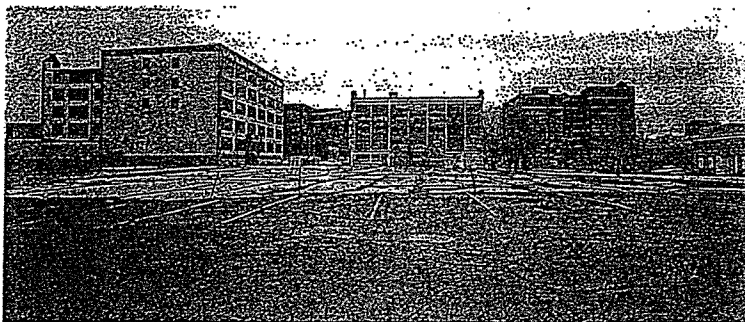
Opie is best known for the color portraits of members of the gay and lesbian community in San Francisco and Los Angeles that she shot between 1989 and 1996. She documented her community, friends, and herself, reconsidering the way they have been portrayed in the media as well as ideas about portraiture. She has noted: "I didn't like the way the leather community was being represented in the mainstream culture. They think we are child molesters and everything that's attached to that. We have had a bad rap. That was probably the biggest reason for doing the portraits, but I was also facing my own internal homophobia. Another big thing was that so many of my friends were dying of AIDS. I decided to do a body of work that was about being really out, and about being out about my sexuality, and being into S&M and leather and stuff like that. Instead of just showing the tattoos and the piercings and the markings on the body, I wanted to do a series of portraits of this community that were incredibly noble."<sup>1</sup> The result was approximately 80 photographs, all of which were shot with a 4x5 camera. In each, a sitter identified by first name only is posed before a vivid background, inspired in part by Hans Holbein's 16th-century paintings. But despite visual similarities with traditional portraiture, Opie does not document widely prominent and publicly identifiable individuals, presenting instead people known only within a select subculture.

With this same sense of documenting community, Opie turned her attention to some of the most iconic architecture in Los Angeles, creating portraits of the city through its urban landscape. In the small platinum prints that comprise the Freeway series (1994-5), the concrete overpasses of Los Angeles are abstracted as dynamic sculpted forms. Devoid of cars, the structures appear to soar through the photos like futuristic runways or launch pads perched on stoic pillars. For Opie, the freeways stand as monuments of our time, and her images record their place within the 20th-century urban development in southern California. In the Mini-Mall series (1997-8), Opie presents the disparate juxtapositions of family-owned shops that often function as ad-hoc community centers throughout Los Angeles and other parts of the country. The language

on the buildings' signs are signifiers of the neighborhoods: many words appear in foreign languages, testimony to the demographics and identity of various subsections of the city.

To create these two bodies of photographs in Los Angeles, Opie worked early in the morning or in the middle of the night to capture spaces devoid of humans so that the architecture predominates the images. The roots of her urban photos can be traced to her work in graduate school at California Institute of the Arts, in which she photographed "ideal homes for ideal families"<sup>2</sup> in the area's master-planned housing developments. Although those photos are not as overtly political as the portraits that followed, Opie nonetheless deconstructs the underlying implications of mainstream values—which she felt excluded from and at odds with—that are embedded within these homes.

Throughout her career Opie has shifted between the positions of insider and outsider depending on the specific community she frames; that movement has enabled her to explore the nature of documentary photography as well as the meaning of community itself. She has commented: "I question how one can stay within documentary photography and still document a community or look at the world, not only from the outside but the inside and begin to talk about it."<sup>3</sup> Though she is known for her work that presents groups or settings with which she is associated—portions of the city of Los Angeles she has lived in, highways she has traveled on, or segments of the lesbian and gay community of which she is a part—her work in St. Louis brought her into new terrain, working on the road and interacting with people and places previously unknown to her.



Untitled #8 (Saint Louis), 1999-2000

Opie came to St. Louis by way of having received the 1999-2000 Henry L. and Natalie E. Freund Fellowship, an artist residency co-sponsored by the Saint Louis Art Museum and Washington University. This fellowship provides a unique opportunity for an artist to teach at the University, produce new work, and show that work at the Museum. Living in St. Louis for two one-month periods—October 1999 and April 2000—Opie immersed herself

Saint Louis Art Museum, "In Between here and there"

# Opie, Catherine

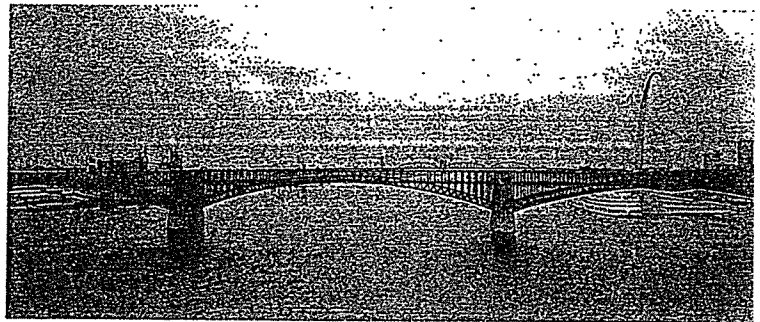
in the past and present conditions of the city, exploring its current urban landscape as well as photographs from the early 20th century when St. Louis was at its peak. She set out to reveal and document the identity of the city and created a new body of black-and-white photographs. Twelve are on view in this exhibition, which marks the beginning of Opie's look at American cities. Prior to her arrival in St. Louis she traveled 9,000 miles across the United States, photographing women in lesbian relationships and their self-defined family units. The resulting Domestic series (1998) led Opie to investigate terrain "outside [her] own backyard."<sup>4</sup>

During the course of her residency, the artist found herself drawn to the historic development of St. Louis, which progressed westward from its founding on the Mississippi River towards Forest Park, the site of the 1904 World's Fair. Her photographs in and around downtown and the Park capture the present conditions of the city through the visual language of the past by using the panoramic format that was frequently employed to document the American landscape at the turn of the 20th century. While St. Louis may appear less majestic now than it did one hundred years ago, Opie's imagery nonetheless highlights the beauty she sees in urban development and the potential for the preservation, restoration, and rejuvenation of the city.

Opie's stay in St. Louis occurred at a time when she was relocating her home and studio from Los Angeles to New York. In the course of this cross-country move, the artist traveled by car from west to east and then from east to west along the American highways, stopping in both directions to teach in St. Louis. She documented these journeys in a group of color photographs, three of which are bound as single images in artist books that are also included in the exhibition. Each presents an iconic image of a place in the United States: a western landscape, an eastern landscape, and a midwestern monument—the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. They trace her travels across America and record her displacement, relocation, and transition between cities and communities, or "in between here and there" as she has titled the exhibition.

Unfamiliar with St. Louis when she arrived, Opie proceeded as she has always done since receiving a camera for her ninth birthday: "[I] wander around with my camera to describe my relationship to the world and where I live."<sup>5</sup> The result of these wanderings is a look at this city in light of its historic and continuing east-to-west development, and the north-south access ways and vistas that run through it. Similar to most mid-sized American cities, St. Louis is made up of distinct communities, socially divided between city and suburbs, old and new, rich and poor, black and white. But this city is also one with embedded geographic bifurcations: most apparent is the Mississippi River that separates Missouri from Illinois and, more generally, the eastern portion of the United

States from the western. Opie used this idea to structure the St. Louis series: the river, a street, a fence, or a natural element acts as a visual divider in many of the photographs. Like her earlier images in Los Angeles, the local landscape is emptied of cars and people; and like all of her series, the St. Louis photos are more conceptually unified than traditional documentary photography. Opie's formally composed imagery can be compared to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, the team of German artists who have presented postindustrial architectural structures such as water towers, coal mines, and steel mills in series since the early 1960s. Their systematic examinations are organized around consistent formal patterns found in the urban landscape.



Untitled #7 (Saint Louis), 1999-2000

Opie's work in St. Louis is another demonstration of her interest in communities. Whether approaching a body of work as an insider or an outsider, she sheds light on the communities she works in, showing images that identify and unify them. As Opie has stated: "The underlying basis of all my work has been about the structure of urban and suburban space, and about how communities begin to form. I'm curious about the way family begins to be defined within community. In a suburban community the family is defined by the individual house. In the gay and lesbian SM community family is defined by those members who get together on holidays, and who are close friends. My work is always close to home."<sup>6</sup>

Rochelle Steiner  
Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art

## Notes

- 1 Suzanne Muchnic, "L.A. Story," *ARTnews*, September 1998, p. 151.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 3 Terry R. Myers, "Catherine Opie," *On Paper*, January–February 1998, p. 42.
- 4 Conversation with the artist, September 2000.
- 5 Muchnic, *op cit.*, p. 152.
- 6 Russell Ferguson, "Catherine Opie," *index*, April 1996, p. 28.

Saint Louis Art Museum, "In between here and there"