

Maura Reilly, "The Drive to Describe: An Interview with Catherine Opie," *Art Journal*, Summer 2001, pp. 82–96.



Catherine Opie is a social documentary photographer of international renown whose primary artistic concerns are community and identity—gender, sexual, or otherwise. She rose to prominence in the early 1990s with an extraordinary series of portraits of her close friends within the Los Angeles S-M community.

Maura Reilly

The Drive to Describe: An Interview with Catherine Opie

Her *Being and Having* series of 1991 consists of thirteen portraits of the artist's lesbian friends, donning theatrical moustaches, goatees, and "masculine" names, (Papa Bear, Wolf, and so on), while another series from that period, *Portraits*, offers up lushly colored, sympathetic images of her "marginalized" subjects—cross-dressers, tattooed dominatrixes, female-to-male transsexuals, drag kings, and other body manipulators. In 1994, Opie surprised viewers accustomed to her gender-bender imagery by producing a series of small platinum prints depicting the *Freeways* in and

around her California home. In 1997, she continued in the mode of American "landscape" photography, Los Angeles-style, with her *Mini-malls*, a series of large Iris prints documenting local strip malls. Then, in 1999, Opie exhibited her *O folio*, a series of six photogravures that depict severely cropped lesbian porn images. That same year she presented *Domestic*, a sequence of documentary images of lesbians (couples, groups of friends, roommates) in their domestic settings. In 2000, Opie showed her *Polaroids*, a series of large-scale pictures dedicated to the performance work of Ron Athey. More recently, she has been working on her *Wall Street* series, a sequence of photographs in which she shoots Manhattan's financial district "emptied out," as if it were a Western landscape. The latter will be exhibited in fall 2001 at Regen Projects in Los Angeles. In the following interview, conducted on January 14 and February 18, 2001, Opie discusses her first photographs, how she came to photography, her formative influences, her academic background at the San Francisco Art Institute and CalArts, and her most recent exhibitions.

Reilly: Your most recent show in New York was at Thread Waxing Space in SoHo, where you exhibited a series of portraits of the controversial, LA-based performance artist Ron Athey and his troupe done with a large-format Polaroid camera. Can you tell me how that series came about?

Opie: That series was part of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS. Other artists, like Robert Rauschenberg and Edward Ruscha, have participated. I was one of the youngest artists ever asked. The Estate Project has been going on for over ten years; half the money goes to the organization, and the other half goes to an artist living with AIDS. So, in this instance, half the money went directly to Ron Athey. That body of work was my gift to Ron. The whole project was a tribute to Ron and his S-M performance work. He's one of my heroes.

Reilly: Haven't you performed in Athey's performance troupe yourself?

Opie: Yes. I performed with him in Mexico City in *Deliverance*, a trilogy of performances that lasted three-and-one-half hours, and in performances in LA. I was in Catherine Saalfeld's film *Hallelujah* (1998), too, which explored Athey's life and work through interviews and excerpted performances. In that I played the Stripper,

Self-Portrait/Pervert, 1994.
Chromogenic print, ed. of
8.40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2
cm). Courtesy of Gorney
Bravin + Lee, New York, and
Regen Projects, Los
Angeles.

and Daddy Boot. And then in the scene where Ron had the crown of thorns on his head as St. Sebastian, I was the one who whipped him, carried him, and tied him to the cross. And then I performed at the ball, too, at the end of the film, when all the women get married to each other. One of the great things to talk about with Athey is not Athey as a language of male homosexuality, but rather as a queer language, as a truly encompassing language that passes through any gender classification. It's amazing, too, in the way that he uses woman. What other gay male performer, besides Athey, has embodied a dyke sensibility? Nobody. His gestures are so loving toward his dyke sisters. I mean, he has a bull dagger tattoo on his forearm in celebration of his dyke sisters. That's one of the reasons I love and support him so much. Not only is he an incredible artist, but he has also embraced a lesbian sensibility—and he respects lesbians. And quite frankly, there are very few gay men who respect lesbians. His performances are about the queer community as a whole.

Reilly: I read somewhere that Athey was raised by his grandmother and aunt and was groomed for a career as a fundamentalist minister in the Pentecostal church, and that in his early years he spoke in tongues and was involved in faith healing. Now, two decades later, he's renowned for his onstage rituals, including mummification, flagellation, blood-letting, and piercings. And the titles he gives his works, such as *Martyrs and Saints* and *Deliverance*, verge on the sacrilegious. He's gone from an evangelical upbringing to religious blasphemy. It's incredible.

Opie: I know. Wouldn't it be brilliant to do a poster of John Ashcroft and Ron Athey, who both come from the same religious background, to show the completely extreme reactions to one's upbringing? But as far the series goes, Ron and I met on a Friday, knowing we were going to do this project. Since I'd performed with him, I knew his pieces pretty well. We decided to restage in the studio some of the scenarios from his performances. We storyboarded them, and I picked the colors and the costuming. We shot the Polaroids for two days during a blizzard in New York.

Reilly: Was that the first time you'd worked extensively with a Polaroid camera?

Opie: Yes. Patrick Moore, the director of the Estate Project, found that camera for me. I was thrilled. It's a 40 x 107 inch Polaroid. They're unique prints. I lit the heck out of each of the scenarios so as to achieve the lushness in color that is important to me. I knew that that's what I would have to do with that Polaroid material in order to pop the color.

Reilly: I think my favorite image from that show was the one of Athey in the role of Saint Sebastian, which shows his fully tattooed body suspended from scaffolding, with spinal tap needles (with feathers) throughout his body, going through 2-1/2 inches of flesh. His face is bleeding from a removed crown of thorns, and his scrotum is enlarged with saline solution. It's an incredibly powerful, heretical image of queer sexuality with Athey in the role of Christian martyr. It's also a difficult image to look at. In fact, I know a lot of people who had difficulty looking at the images in the show because they were so explicit, so actively sadomasochistic.



Untitled #13, 2000. Color Polaroid. 103 x 41 in. (261.6 x 104.1 cm). Courtesy of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, New York.

Untitled #9, 2000. Color Polaroid. 103 x 41 in. (261.6 x 104.1 cm). Courtesy of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, New York.



Opie: Yeah, I was surprised when nothing came down about the show. I thought it might be shut down. I was shocked that it got no press. Maybe if the images had been shown at the New Museum of Contemporary Art or at the Brooklyn Museum it would have gotten slammed. Everyone's scared to death to take that work on. It terrifies them.

Reilly: Well, it's much more explicit than your previous work. Maybe it's difficult for people to view S-M tableaux in the context of a gallery setting, versus the privacy of their home. Besides, prior to this recent series, your images have been passive. These, on the other hand, are different. You show performers fist-fighting one another, cutting lines into each other's backs, piercing each other with needles, and so on. In short, they're incredibly active, in comparison.

Opie: Yes, they are. But that's where I worked in conversation with Ron. It's a tribute to him.

Reilly: Isn't it also a tribute to Robert Mapplethorpe?

Opie: Yes and no. The *O* folio of photogravures from 1999 is my conversation with Mapplethorpe. It's a series of six S-M porn images that are shot in extreme close-up. In fact, they are all details from different lesbian porn images that I took years ago for *On Our Backs*. They're much more abstract than Mapplethorpe's *X* portfolio. Although I guess you're right about the Polaroids, because in that image of Ron

with the pearls coming out of his ass, where he's looking back at the camera, I was definitely thinking of Mapplethorpe's self-portrait with the whip coming out of his ass.

Reilly: Why did you title the series of photogravures the *O* folio?

Opie: "O" as in hugs and kisses with Mapplethorpe's *X* folio. It's also my hugging Mapplethorpe. "O" as in anus, vagina, or other orifices. Tic-Tac-Toe, X-O-X. "O" as in Opie. All of those things.

Reilly: I think of Mapplethorpe as being the first artist to aestheticize the gay male community. I think of you as being the first artist to aestheticize not only the gay male community, but the lesbian and transgender ones, as well.



O, 1999. Photogravure, ed. of 26, 6 artist proofs, 2 printer proofs, 1 I.C. Editions impression. 18½ x 14 in. (47 x 35.6 cm), paper; 8 x 8 in. (20.3 x 20.3 cm), image. This image, I.C. Editions impression. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York.

Catherine, Melanie & Sadie Rain from the *Domestic* series, 1998. Chromogenic print, ed. of 5. 40 x 50 in. (101.6 x 127 cm). Courtesy of Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Opie: Yeah, other than the portraits of Lisa Lyons, there were few dykes in Mapplethorpe's work. It was definitely fag work [laughs]. And mine isn't fag work. Mine is about the whole queer community.

Reilly: I agree. Although recently you've been a little lesbocentric, now haven't you? [laughs]. At your most recent show at Gorney Bravin + Lee, you presented the *Domestic* series, a sequence of sumptuously colored, documentary images of lesbians in their domestic settings. Can you talk a little bit about how that series came about?

Opie: For that series, I traveled in an RV across the United States on a two-month road trip photographing lesbian couples and families in their homes or environments. There are images of lesbians relaxing in their backyards, hanging out in kitchens, floating in their pools, playing with their children, lounging on beds, staring out windows, and so on. I exhibited them as large-scale color portraits, accompanied by a group of small still lifes from these various settings. I wanted to focus on the idea of community, the individuals within that community, and how communities are formed.

Reilly: Seeing that series made me realize that there are few well-known photographers documenting lesbian communities, except for Della Grace Volcano, Kaucyila Brooke, and Tee Corinne. Or perhaps I should qualify that by saying, there are few who get exhibited. You show lesbian couples experiencing happy domestic moments, but there's also, correct me if I'm wrong, a slight, barely detectable element of sadness or longing in the images, too.

Opie: Absolutely. Many of the images are suffused with longing. A lot of this is about my own desire. I've never really had a successful domestic relationship. I've

always wanted one, but so far I've never lived successfully with anyone. So in the *Domestic* series, I was traveling around trying to figure out what it was all about. I think I learned a lot. Mostly, I realized that the lesbian domestic couple doesn't necessarily have to be based on the heterosexual model. But I also realized how much this series had to do with my broader interest in community, in this case, the lesbian one.

Reilly: Community is definitely the overarching theme in your work—and not just the queer community, but communities, in general. Where does this fascination with communities come from? Is it visible in your early work as well? Was the idea of community important to you as early as your graduate work from CalArts, for instance?

Opie: Definitely. Even earlier, actually. I recently came across the first roll of film I ever shot. I was nine years old. I was amazed how many of the same ideas I was interested in then are still present in my work today. The first

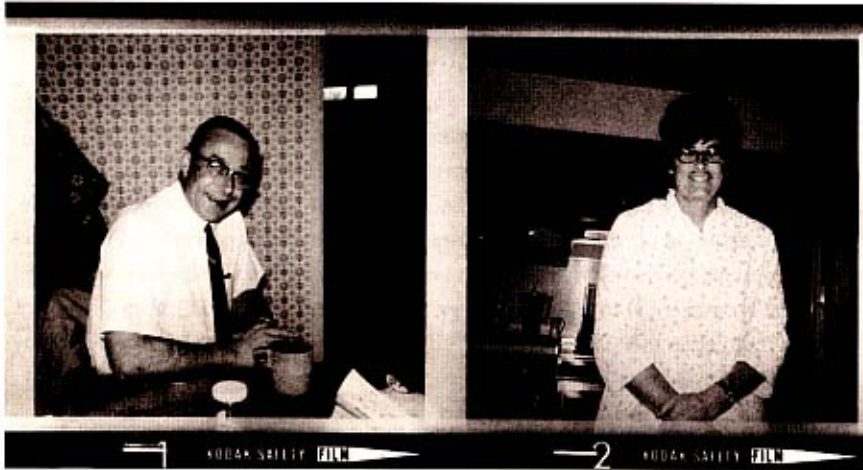
two pictures I ever took are of my dad at the dining room table and my mom in the kitchen, looking like a drag queen. Safety frame #1 and #2. I also took a lot of photographs of my neighborhood in Sandusky, Ohio, self-portraits, pictures of my friends, my brother, my mom knitting, landscapes, the sexy lifeguards at the country club, and photographs of stop signs and speed limit signs.

Reilly: So your typology as an artist has changed little since then. You're still taking portraits of your loved ones, pictures of your neighborhood. And your interest in signage and community are there, too.

Opie: Those first images are remarkably close to what I'm still doing. I think it's interesting that since a very young age I've had this drive to describe . . . to document. Who knows why really? It's not like someone said to me, "You should shoot American cities or communities." It's just this intense desire to catalogue and archive the people and the places around me.

Reilly: How did you initially become interested in photography?

Opie: When I was nine, I had to write a report for school on child labor laws. I came across a photograph by Lewis Hine in my social studies book that showed a little girl in North Carolina working in a cotton mill, dated 1908–9. I wrote the report all from the importance of the photograph and what I learned from it, as opposed to what I learned from the reading. Because I'm a visual person, I was drawn instantly to the photo. That photograph changed my life. It really did. From that point on, I knew what I wanted to do. I declared to my parents that night at dinner that I wanted to take photographs. I didn't quite have the language to say it, but basically I told my parents that I wanted to be a social documentary photographer. And I asked for a camera for my birthday. They gave me a 127 Kodak Instamatic.



Dad and Mom, 1970. Black-and-white photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Reilly: So the American documentarian Lewis Hine changed your life. Who are some of your other important early influences?

Opie: Let's see. Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, Margaret Bourke-White, Helen Levitt are some of my favorites.

Reilly: Well, they all took pictures in a social documentary vein that explored issues of community and identity. That makes sense.

Opie: But as far as early influences, I'd have to say that the studio art faculties of the San Francisco Art Institute and CalArts were major. At SFAI, I studied with Hank Wessel and Larry Sultan. Hank's done a lot of street photography. He was a Szarkowski school guy. Larry's done amazing documentary work. They were the two main supports for me at SFAI. I think they must have seen something in me because they put a lot of energy into me. And then at CalArts, I studied with Millie Wilson, Catherine Lord, Allan Sekula, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Connie Hatch. So I went from this traditional training as an undergrad, using black and white, learning street photography, with Hank and Larry, to really learning the conceptual language behind the medium. At CalArts I received a firm grounding in the history of photography and critical theory, too.

Reilly: Yeah, and it also sounds like you got a firm grounding in feminism as well, working with Wilson, Lord, and Hatch.

Opie: Yes. I took a summer course as an undergrad with Connie Hatch called "Women in Photography," where I learned tons about feminist theory. We read things by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Susan Sontag, Judith Williamson, and other important feminists. But I had a hard time understanding all of that stuff at the time. The readings in that class were so difficult. I was lost most of the time.

Reilly: But it somehow seeped in.

Opie: It definitely seeped in. One of my favorite classes at CalArts was with Catherine Lord. It was a "Utopian Feminist" class in which we read Marge Piercy, Octavia Butler, Ursula Le Guin, and so on. And then we'd go watch horror movies and sci-fi flicks, like *Aliens*, and talk about how kick-butt women can be. Yeah, I would recommend CalArts to anybody! It provided me with a critical background that has hugely informed my work.

Reilly: If you were shooting black-and-white street photography at SFAI, how did your work change under the more conceptual and critical influences at CalArts?

Opie: At CalArts, I worked on the *Master Plan*, a series of two hundred photographs shot over a two-year period. That thesis project dealt with Valencia and the idea of Southern Californian planned communities being under this whole guise of the master plan. That's what they call these planned communities. The master plan is the notion of where one can work, live, and play. This is how they sell the community. The community comes with a rules and regulations handbook the size of a bible. Valencia is one of the largest master plan communities in the entire country. Having landed at CalArts in Valencia without a car, and being a street photographer, I started wandering out of my dorm

room and stumbled into this whole suburban growth. I was at this point a leather dyke wandering into suburban hell, and I realized that this needed to be talked about. So I organized the project into two exhibitions of over two hundred photos, one show for my first year, one for my second. It all concentrated on, first, the changing landscapes, then on the housing being built (like a Lewis Baltz Park City gesture). There's nothing more beautiful than model homes. I photographed the identity of it all through the model homes. How was the community marketed? Who was it marketed to? Who does it try to exclude? What's its ideology? I tried to get into the identity politics of why someone would choose to move to a master plan community. I photographed the model homes as kind of the model of what they're trying to do, because the little girls' rooms were pink with cheerleader outfits and the little boys' rooms had baseball wallpaper. And all the advertising for the community was little white children with pink dresses and pigtails saying, "I come home to Valencia."

Reilly: Isn't that just like the planned community you moved to when you were thirteen, Rancho Bernardo, outside of San Diego?

Opie: Pretty much so.

Reilly: So from age thirteen onward, you were living under those repressed, upper middle-class, strictly gender-differentiated conditions?

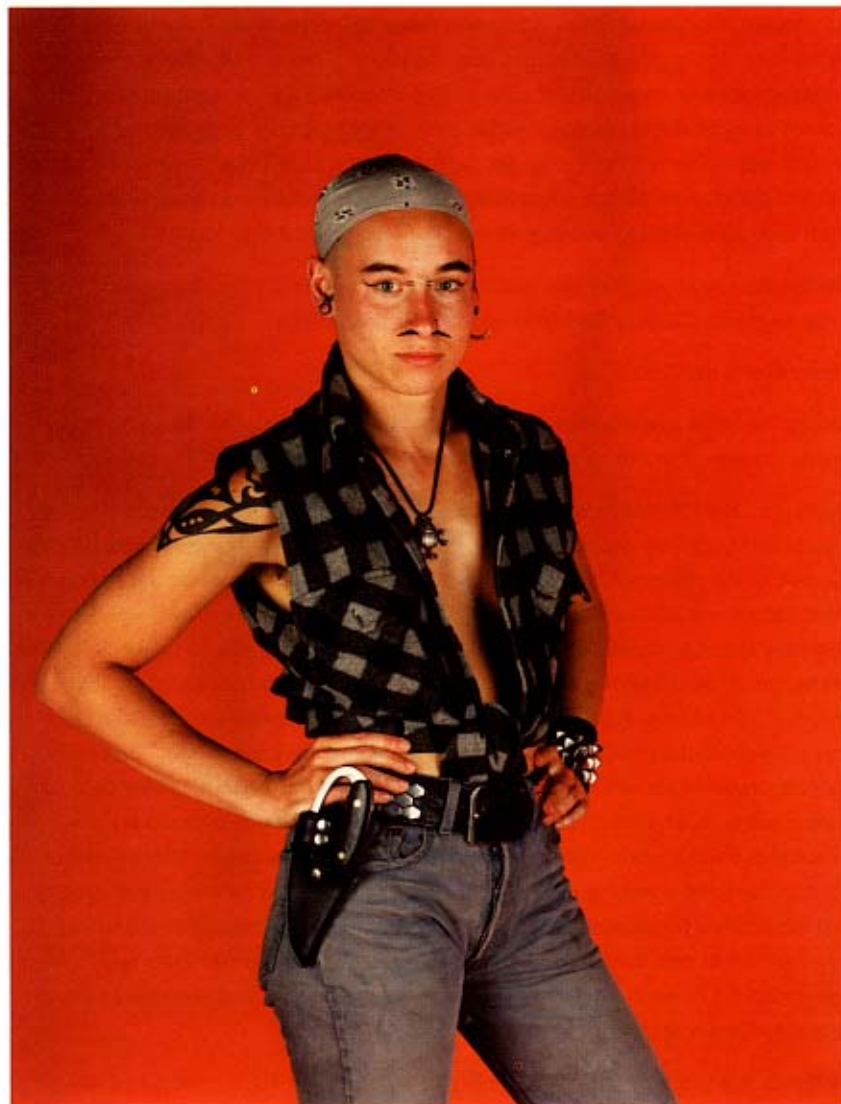
Opie: Yes. But it made sense for my family to move there because we had family friends there, and my dad was retiring. Besides, we had always lived in suburbia. At the end of the project, I interviewed two families and photographed the interiors of their homes and did portraits of them. My final installation was in their voice, asking why they chose to move to the master plan community. So you had a whole line of landscapes, then a line of their portraits and interiors of houses, and then a whole line of model homes, and in between various quotes. It ended up being a project that helped me start thinking about photography in a conceptual way. That's what CalArts provided for me. I came with all the tools from SFAI about being an image maker, but without a lot of the language. And then at CalArts, with studying with Wodiczko, Sekula, Lord, Wilson, and Hatch, they were important thinkers about photography and contemporary art. So I went into this heavily theoretical program that questioned the existence of straight documentary photography, and having been trained as one, I still held onto the notion of image as truth. They taught me how to have a more complex dialogue with documentary. I've been able to use that conceptual training as a basis.

Reilly: It sounds like CalArts helped you reconcile being a conceptual documentary photographer, which is a seemingly contradictory idea.

Opie: Yes, and that's why the *Master Plan* thesis project was so important to me. It really started me off. I would say at that point, when I went to grad school at CalArts and worked on the *Master Plan* for two years, that experience started off this discourse that I've had with the medium of photography and my ideas around it for the last fifteen years.

Reilly: Ideas about community, gender stereotyping, the myth of the American Dream are all constant themes in your work. And they're all there in your

master's thesis. You also mentioned that you received a strong grounding in the history of photography. Do you find yourself using many references to photo history and/or the history of art in your different bodies of work? For instance, in a previous interview, you described your ongoing series of *Portraits* as August Sander meets Hans Holbein.



Idexa, 1993. Chromogenic print, ed. of 8. 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm). Courtesy of Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Opie: I'm constantly looking at the history of photography and art as a source of inspiration. My portraits are hugely influenced by Sander's typology, as is visible in his documentary project, *Face of Our Time* (1929). But I also want them to move toward a more traditional, formal portrait motif. That's where Holbein comes in. He's the influence behind the color and the gaze, too.

Reilly: Except that, in your work, instead of the wealthy, upper-class sitter in a Holbein portrait, you're elevating your friends, people from our American "subculture"—transvestites, M2F transsexuals, dominatrixes, and so on—to the status of "high art," as worthy subjects for artistic contemplation. In so doing, you're insisting that these individuals be shown respect—as they should be. The images demand our attention, as well. They're large, lush, and painterly.

Opie: They're definitely painterly. In fact, people sometimes come up to me and say, "I love your paintings." Isn't that funny? I want the sitters, and the S-M community, to be respected. My own experience of being bald, tattooed, and pierced was that people were scared of me. People still approach me and say,

"God, you're so nice," as if they expect something else, as if they expect me to be hard.

Reilly: Perhaps your self-portraits scare people off?

Opie: Definitely.

Reilly: And, yet, I've always seen past what's "written" on your sitters' bodies, so to speak. There is an omnipresent vulnerability and sweetness about your portraits that belies the transgressive nature of what's presented. For

instance, in the portrait of Crystal Mason or Alistair Fate or even Justin Bond, there's a tenderness revealed—a softness. They're incredibly sympathetic images, another thing that links them to Sander, I guess.

Opie: That's an interesting point about the softness. I think I was looking for a vulnerability. That's probably why some of my friends don't like their portraits. Idexa

has always disliked hers. She doesn't recognize herself, she says. I must have captured something unusual at the moment when I snapped the shutter, or when I edited it and picked that one. Another thing about the portraits that always amazes me is the way people just obsess about whether the sitter is a boy, a girl, a M2F transsexual, or a drag queen! I don't like to think about that body of work in terms of gender, or gender-bending. I was just documenting a community of people who happened, coincidentally, to be interested in those ideas.

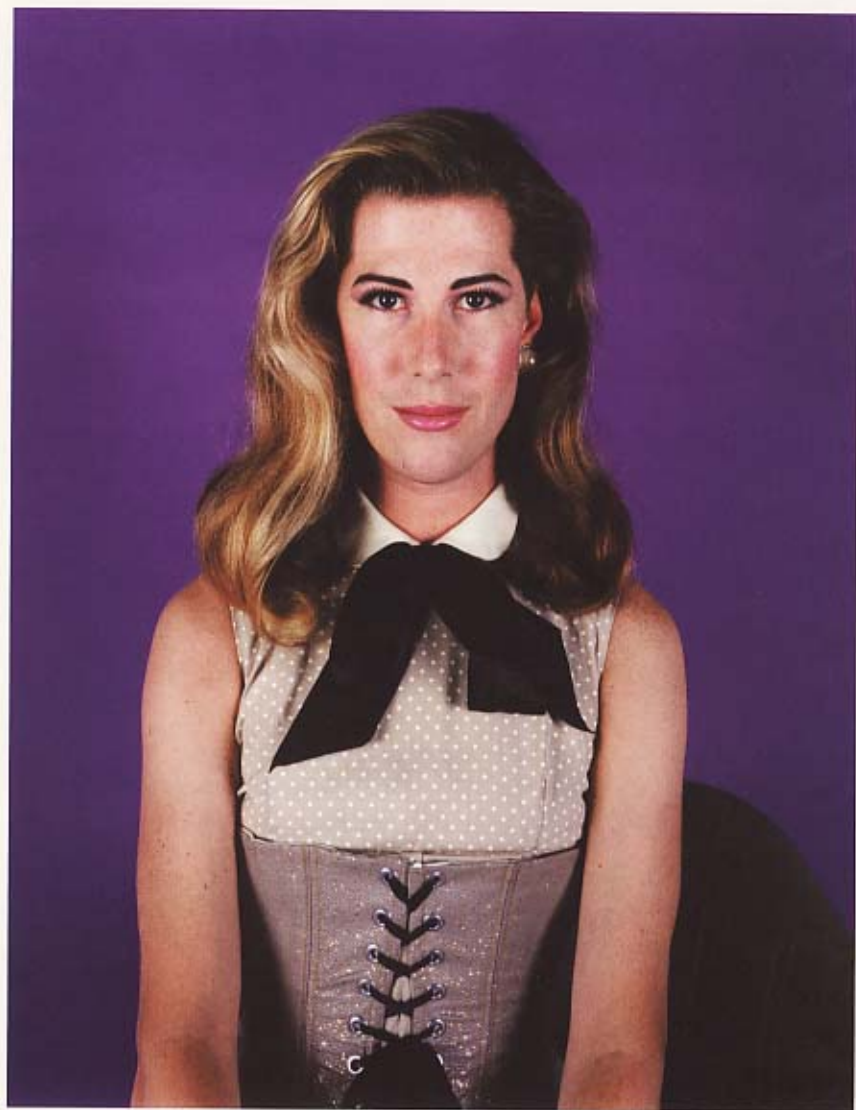
Reilly: When I see the portrait of Justin Bond, in his polka-dot dress, leather bustier, coiffed blonde hair, false eyelashes, and pink lipstick, I think about how beautiful he is, and how much his facial expression and stance relay a sense of self-respect and possession. What I also like about your portraits is that they manage to disrupt the traditional subject-object dialogue insofar as the sitter's intense glance back at the viewer somehow disallows objectification, as well as any pathologization.

Opie: Yeah, that's why I don't title them, *Justin Bond*, *Drag Queen* or *Mitch*, *Female-to-Male Transsexual*, because that's not important really. Besides,

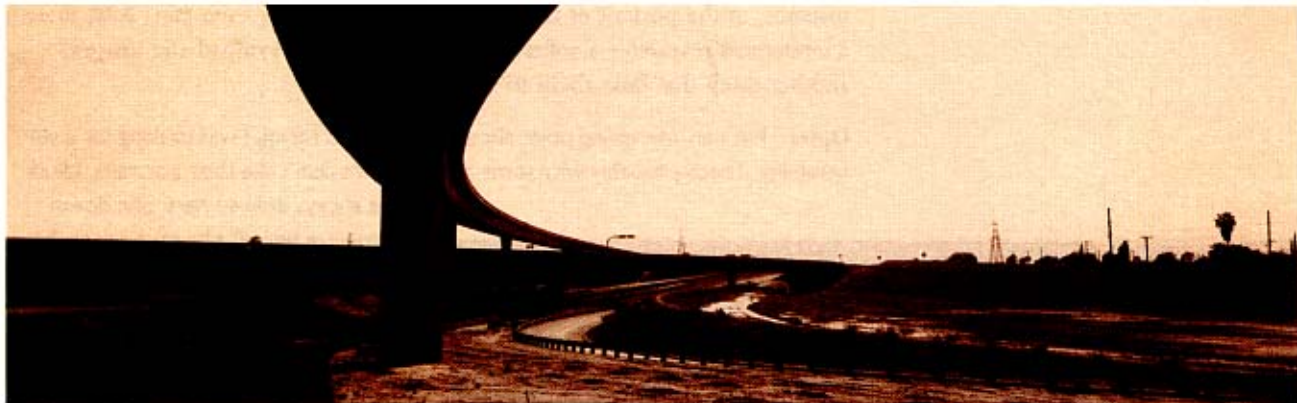
titles like that would succeed in pathologizing them, and I don't want that.

Reilly: Now, can we talk a little bit about your *Freeway* series? I read somewhere that you'd been thinking of nineteenth-century landscape photography when you made that work. And since that series established you as an American landscape photographer, Los Angeles-style, could we place you in the lineage of such greats as Timothy O'Sullivan or Carleton Watkins?

Opie: As far as the *Freeway* series goes, I wasn't looking so much at people like O'Sullivan or Watkins, as I was at Maxime DuCamp, and his panorama photographs



Justin Bond, 1993. Chromogenic print, ed. of 8. 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm). Courtesy of Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Untitled #31, 1994. Platinum print, ed. of 5. 2¼ x 6¼ in. (5.7 x 17.1 cm). Courtesy of Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

of the Egyptian pyramids from the early 1850s. Those who photographed the American West at that time never used that panoramic format. O'Sullivan did a few panoramas, but not many. But most of the American West photographers were doing 11 x 14 or 8 x 10 images, hauling those huge cameras around the West, and hand-coating their glass plates. I was thinking, too, of all those historical banquet photographs—those big long panoramas of groups of people—and sometimes they were used for landscapes. George Eastman House has a great collection of them. That's mainly what I'm shooting with in the *Freeway* series—a banquet camera. Most people think that I was thinking about cinema and Jeff Wall in some ways, but I actually wasn't thinking about cinema at all. The *Freeways* are really about how I perceive the Western landscape today. It was all about this kind of expanse.

Reilly: But what's interesting is that instead of using mural-sized prints to emphasize that expanse, you printed them on an intimate scale, 2¼ x 6¼ inches.

Opie: I was originally going to make them huge. But then I started looking at the contact prints, and I started thinking about that whole nineteenth-century language again, and I realized that they had to be small, and had to be platinum.

Reilly: Your *Freeways* also have that kind of archaeological element, as if we're looking at postapocalyptic freeways, devoid of people (or any signs of humanity), as if we're looking at a relic, of sorts.

Opie: That's exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to document the LA freeways using straight photography. The conceptual motif involved was the emptying out of the freeways.

Reilly: Now this conceptual motif of "emptying out," as you call it, is also visible in your *Beverly Hills/Bel Air* series, as well as in your *Mini-malls*, where again there are no humans visible. What is with your fascination with making places, whether they be freeways, minimalls, houses, seem uninhabited? To me there's something visually contradictory or oxymoronic about an empty freeway.

Opie: Well, they are empty at times. At least when I'm there at 5:30 in the morning. But also, as far as the *Houses* series, you never see people hanging out in front of their Beverly Hills homes. And with all the security, no one can get near those

houses. But the *Houses* were also about how people in LA laugh at those homes, because architecturally they're a joke. It's the same with the minimalls. People don't want to acknowledge minimalls, and they don't want to acknowledge freeways. So I'm really interested in that tool of photography. It's still the most amazing and brilliant tool for describing and capturing, and that's why there's that historical importance of documentary practice for me. I feel like I am going around picking things apart, forcing people to look at places and communities that they really don't want to look at. Yet, I want to look at these places, and at those communities. I'm in love with those kinds of images. I'm in love with decay. For instance, I was recently living in St. Louis, and I loved how the city was falling apart, and yet it still holds the dream of the great American city that it was around the time of the 1904 World's Fair.

Reilly: So this conceptual motif of emptying out helps to emphasize the decay, the sense of loss, and perhaps your nostalgia for another era?

Opie: Exactly. The emptiness is about loss. It's about nostalgia. In fact, right now I'm working on a series about Wall Street emptied out. Using a 7 x 17 Keith Canham banquet camera, I've been shooting the area on the weekends, at dawn, as if it were a Western landscape. I'm shooting downtown Manhattan in panorama format.



House #1 (Beverly Hills), 1995.
Chromogenic print, ed. of 5.
39 x 49 in. (99.1 x 124.5 cm).
Courtesy of Gorney Bravin +
Lee, New York, and Regen
Projects, Los Angeles.

Reilly: So unlike other documentary photographers, like Berenice Abbott, who shot New York City in vertical format, you're interested in the horizontal, the landscape aspect of the city?

Opie: And I go early, before the people arrive. I don't need the people there. I'm interested in the way that the language of the people is embedded in the body of the structures in the same way that the language is embedded on the bodies of my friends and myself as a structure of identity. It's that kind of separation that I'm interested in. And I feel that that language wouldn't be able to be looked at in the same way if the spaces were inhabited by people.

Reilly: That's great. It's like when you look at a skyscraper and you know that thousands of people work in the building, because it's a skyscraper on Wall Street. You don't need to photograph the people because we know those places are inhabited all the time by people.

Opie: And it's much more fascinating to see what it's like emptied out, and it also makes you think about, I don't know, your destiny in a certain way as a human being. I guess I have a little bit of an apocalyptic approach [laughs]. These images

make for a kind of record. These new images are like Abbott's, documents of a changing city.

Reilly: There's the nostalgia again.

Opie: Well, I'm incredibly nostalgic! Basically, I'm a sappy romantic who likes to think about history, and who likes to look at my old childhood photographs and movies my mom made of me and think, "Well, gee . . ." It's so fascinating to think about the family photograph, and how much it has changed with new technology. When we were kids, growing up in the sixties, the only images we had of ourselves were either still photographs or 8mm movies. We couldn't even hear our voices, unless someone was really sophisticated and had sound on their camera. Now we have video, digital cameras, MP3s, and a million other ways to document ourselves. But the still photograph continues to hold a sense of mystery and awe to me.

Reilly: I think there's something sad about the everyday person's obsessive need to document today. People are so concerned with capturing the birthday, the wedding, the vacation, for all eternity, that they don't just stop, look, and enjoy the moment. It's as if they're afraid that if they don't get it down on film, it didn't really happen, or that the memory will disappear. I think it has something to do with a fear of loss.

Opie: I guess that's what I mean when I say that the emptiness in a lot of my photographs is about loss. Trying to capture, document people and places before they disappear. Maybe it's because, in my generation, being forty years old, we've experienced more loss in our youth through what has happened with AIDS that we feel a more profound sense of loss. So many of my portraits are images of my friends who have died of AIDS. And that's the other thing about that emptying out of Wall Street or Los Angeles or these other American cities that I'm going to be documenting. We have lost the original dream of what a city was with the proliferation of the building of suburbia throughout America. And we've lost that utopian notion of difference, and it really bothers me.

Reilly: What do you mean by that "utopian notion of difference"? Do you mean that everything's become homogenous, what with the suburbs, the franchises, the Gap, Home Depot, Starbucks, etc.?

Opie: Yeah, we've somehow lost sight of what America was originally. Think about the power of Ellis Island, the melting pot, and how all that is disappearing in favor of white-bred America. I mean look what's happening politically. Ashcroft as Attorney General. America's not about multiculturalism anymore. And that's what I mean, that cities still hold this utopian notion of what America once was.

Reilly: Most Americans are afraid of cities. They fear them because they fear the Other, and they fear difference.

Opie: That's why Todd Haynes' film *Safe* (1995) is so brilliant. It works on so many different levels about that fear, that paranoia. And that's what my minimalls are about, in some sense. They're about the ways in which, geographically and ethnographically, cities change. I'm always emphasizing in those images the multiple languages that exist at the LA minimalls.



Untitled #1 from Mini-mall series, 1997. Iris print, ed. of 5. 16 x 41 in. (40.6 x 104.1 cm). Courtesy of Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Reilly: I noticed that. The multiple ethnicities of the proprietors, from Korean to Mexican, are always captured in that series. You're right. Minimalls do symbolize the American dream, in a way that a huge mall doesn't, with the franchises owned by corporate America. With minimalls we all know that they're started up by people who are either first- or second-generation Americans opening up a nail salon or the taco place next door.

Opie: Right. And it goes back to early immigration in America, the American dream. Those minimalls still hold this utopian notion of difference that is integral to the American dream. Perhaps that's why people have called me a very "American" photographer.

Reilly: I would say you're nostalgically American.

Opie: [laughs]

Reilly: I would say that you're nostalgic for the myth of America, as the land of the free, as the land of opportunity.

Opie: Yeah, I guess I'm nostalgic for what I thought of as the utopian possibility of what America was set out to stand for; freedom, diversity, and so on. I'm scared for this country. I fear that the religious right is taking over. The omnipresent xenophobia, homophobia is terrifying, and exhausting. And that's why I really do believe that I'm a political artist.

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