

On when to put your work first



An interview with artist and photographer Catherine Opie

June 4, 2018 -

As told to Thora Siemsen, 2536 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Success](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Identity](#).

California is inextricable from much of your work, whether it is because you were documenting local populations or infrastructures, or simply as a consequence of living there. What do you enjoy most about being based there?

I think that being involved as a professor and teaching here for so long I'm constantly reminded of a younger generation. The landscape of institutions in art has really changed from the '80s obviously, and the '90s. Now New York artists are moving from New York to live in LA. You have a lot of people coming from San Francisco who are living in Los Angeles now because the Bay Area has become unaffordable. I think my biggest fear with Los Angeles is not only for the 55,000 homeless people that live on our streets, but also that LA is no longer affordable. Artists like space. They like to go into neighborhoods where they can have space for affordability and that was always such a strong point of Los Angeles that we're losing. We're still not as high as New York or San Francisco, but it is no longer affordable for somebody who's only making \$10 an hour.

Where else do you fantasize about living?

There's lots of places. Actually I would love to live in Norway. I visit Norway and I've even gone there in the middle of January. I'm pretty fascinated by the culture and the landscape, but so much of my identity and politic is also based on being a part of thinking about America. Norway doesn't have the kind of race or ideological severe differences in terms of race and class as America does. I don't know if I'll ever stop asking questions about this country that I live in, and was born in, in my work. I'm not just a studio based artist. I certainly use the studio for portraiture. But I also look at the world outside.

You're known amongst friends as "the mayor of Los Angeles" in part for being so civic-minded. What advice do you have for artists looking to get more involved in their communities?

I think you should take courses. Some people have it innately within their personalities and then are community driven. I came from a family that was fairly political and interested in ideas of democracy and intense debates and conversations around that. I also think that being a camp counselor from the time I was 15 to 21 allowed me to build community from an early age. I think that people who want to be involved should actually work at something that they believe in.

I was born in 1961 and I was taught ideas of citizenship about being a community leader, but I think that citizenship is unfortunately collapsed in a idea of nationalism. I don't think being civic-minded is about being a nationalist in any sense or form. These are things that I talk to my students about and I think that they're really important in terms of the younger generation. I would say that we're seeing it with the incredible amount of energy around the gun debates in America right now and it makes me very, very hopeful.

Me too. You're on quite a few boards, no?

Yeah. Three boards. MOCA, Mike Kelley Foundation, and Andy Warhol Foundation. I'm also a full time professor, an artist, a mom, and a wife. I juggle a lot of hats.

You once purchased a a recreational vehicle to travel across the U.S. making work. How would you describe that trip, and the photographs that came from it?

I really love the body of work. I think it's a fascinating body of work and it's important as a record of ideas around domesticity from very much a women-centered domesticity as far as being lesbians and identifying as dykes. I made that body of work in the mid to late '90s and it was a conversation I was having with Peter Galassi in relationship to his exhibition at MoMA that was put on, "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort."

A lot of my work is in that kind of guise of what it is to be involved in creating dialogue around our communities, how we exit and enter them. Part of photography for me has always been making sure that things that I feel need to be fit within the historical realm of representation, I just go ahead and try to do that.

What would you recommend to an artist preparing to do a trip of that ilk?

Take a friend. I had my dog with me. My dog hated the RV the whole time. It was three and a half months. I tortured the poor thing. I road trip throughout the United States quite a bit. Only once in an RV for three and a half months, but I've been in every single state, Hawaii and Alaska as well. I think especially living in cities we have a very specific kind of impression or perception in relationship to our own contained units of cities. When you get out and you travel across America, you realize so much about politics and representation.

I think that one of the greatest harms of our identity as a culture is actually nostalgia. I think that part of the election of Trump is this notion of nostalgia, of "Make America Great Again." I think that often nostalgia really begins to trip us up in ideas of humanity. Because nostalgia or the idea of the past being better than any kind of future, or that the past will make the future better, is really not looking at the advancement of society as a whole. So, I think road tripping is really great. Getting in the car and going and exploring. It's a vast landscape. At times it's incredibly banal and other times it's incredibly beautiful. I always say that within banality you find creativity.

Your public career began in 1991 with your show "Being and Having," with photos from that exhibition appearing the next year alongside a Judith Butler interview in Artforum. Eight years ago, Artforum's now Editor-In-Chief, David Velasco, wrote, "If [Opie's] project has often been concerned with making 'visible' (or, in the Butlerian register, even 'intelligible') certain kinds of bodies and communities, it's evident that it is—if never really complete—at least now speaking to a changed society." How did having your photographs about Butler's theoretical work feel to you in the '90s and the aughts, and how does it feel now?

It was interesting. It wasn't just Judith Butler. You have to think about what Dorothy Allison was writing about, Pat Califia, Gayle Rubin. A very important book about women and sexuality was published in the '80s out of a Barnard conference called *The Context of 'Between Pleasure and Danger'*.

I think that Butler is around the same generation as I am. I think I'm a little bit younger than she is. But what we were looking at and what we were studying philosophically in terms of Douglas Crimp and also reading so much Foucault and ideas around Derrida and beginning to talk about the body in a way that wasn't really talked about or represented before was all happening at the same time.

So much of it I really, really truly believe was also the incredibly vulnerable nature of our own community to the AIDS crisis. That allowed us to be political activists and take stake in things that were, in my opinion, incredibly important to represent but might not have lead to potentially getting teaching jobs. There was an inherent risk in both Butler and I using our words and our intellect in relationship to creating representations around women in the queer body and ideas around feminism. I think that was really somewhat radical. For the editor to choose to place my photographs with Butler I thought made an enormous amount of sense. I wasn't really well versed in Judith Butler at that point in time. I became more acquainted with her writing later on.

You've spoken about the role of the artist in creating history. How has your understanding of that responsibility changed over the course of your career?

Once you become a mom you don't really maybe necessarily take the same risks to either body or mind as you did when you were younger. I think that having Oliver when I was 40, starting

a domestic relationship with Julie, having her 21 year old daughter join our family, and now we have a four-year-old grandson... For the first time I wasn't alone. I was realizing that early cutting from 1993's [Self-Portrait](#) on my back. I think that's when responsibility became different for me. That doesn't mean not taking risks anymore, but it meant that I had to show up for this family that I really wanted.

It meant that I didn't buy RVs and travel across the country for three and a half months exploring. Even though I really believe my artwork hasn't suffered at all from deciding to have a domestic relationship, there's so much conversation around artists who are mothers, whether you have a child or not. It seems like this is something that's being really explored right now both theoretically and personally. I would say once I became pregnant and once I decided that what I was going to do was create a domestic relationship, then I needed to make sure that I was responsible enough to maintain it, because it's really important to me. That doesn't mean that you get to hop on a plane whenever you want to and take off. Pretty soon I'll be able to do that again. Oliver's 16. In two years he'll be in college.

In an [interview](#) with Fiona Duncan you said, "What I tell my students is that the work has to come first. And if the work isn't doing what the work should be doing, then you're not going to be able to have a sustainable career." What are some ways you counsel students who are having trouble putting their work first?

I ask them what's important to them. Some people think that the career and the moving within certain circles of the art world takes precedent to actually making the work. What I try to do is just actually mentor them in relationship to what their true ideas are and what they're trying to accomplish with their work. By no means is that related to what I try to accomplish with my own work. Even though it's a research university, I try to keep my practice very separate from the students as much as I can. Of course, I use myself as an example sometimes because it is my life that I've lived for a long time and I've had a lot of experiences that I can share with them.

To be a 57 year old woman artist who's been able to maintain my career since my late 20s I think is pretty rare and phenomenal. You have to work really hard at it. That's not necessarily the other aspect of engagement within the art world. It's not going to every art fair because you need to be seen and you want to do it that way. I'm very fortunate with the people that I teach with at UCLA, an unbelievable group of international artists who truly believe in mentoring students. I think that's the precedent that we put forward and that all of us believe in our department. I'm really lucky that I get to teach with an amazing group of people that share the same philosophy.

Did you ever encounter difficulties in your own practice with putting the work first?

Not really. I think that some of the tricky things are doing editorial or commercial work. Does that then define your own practice? How do you separate that? I think that obviously so many photographers now do both and have done both. I think that early on in my career I tried to keep that really, really separate. Now I feel secure enough within my own identity as an exhibiting artist to go ahead and begin to do other things and commissions and so forth.

Maggie Nelson wrote about you in her book *The Argonauts*, that you imply "it's the binary of normative/transgressive that's unsustainable, along with the demand that anyone live a life that's all one thing." Are there ways you have had to assuage your own fears of what it would mean to produce work seemingly antipodean to what you were interested in before?

I think we all have fears. Growing up in a generation of queers that I was involved in there was a lot of internal homophobia. Within internal homophobia comes inherent fears in relationship to moving your life forward. I think the biggest fear of mine always has been being a singular identity and the idea of binary identity. That's something that I always try to escape. I think that we're much more complex in our thoughts and even within our approaches to different bodies of work that don't necessarily always have one viewpoint. I define myself as a queer and a dyke but that doesn't mean that every single thing that I make comes out of that identity and is somehow placed within the definitions of the bodies of work.

What are you looking forward to about the future?

My son going to college. Really looking forward to that even though I think I'm gonna cry every day while I'm dropping him off. My wife and I have never lived together without raising a child. I'm really curious to have time and a relationship with her that doesn't necessarily revolve around the day in, day out of being a family. I'm looking forward to retiring in the not so distant future from teaching and just really allowing myself to only make work. I've never allowed myself that. I've always had a full time job as well as being an artist. I'm getting to the point where I really want to just only be an artist.

Catherine Opie recommends:

[The Importance of Being Iceland](#) by Eileen Myles.

[Regarding the Pain of Others](#) by Susan Sontag.

[A Field Guide to Getting Lost](#) by Rebecca Solnit.

[The Walking Dead](#) as a TV program in the early years was like looking at an American Gothic novel. I would say that the writing has changed a little bit from the early ones. Season one through three kind of blew me away. Now I just watch it because I stay involved.

I just finished binging [Westworld](#) and it's freaky as hell. It's almost too gnarly but it's not that gnarly. It really bothers me, the violence towards women, intensely. I'm interested to see if they can do something different with that storyline.

[The Handmaid's Tale](#) blew my mind. I do watch a lot of TV.

Name

Catherine Opie

Vocation

Artist, Photographer



Photo credit: Heather Rasmussen

