

Art Now LA
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Catherine Opie
Harmony is Fraught
Regen Projects
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by Jody Zellen



In *Harmony is Fraught*, Catherine Opie displays photographic images shot over the entire span of her career. She has been photographing domestic spaces, friends and family, the urban landscape, acts of protest, as well as the gay community since the late 1980s, and in this expansive exhibition of more than sixty images that have never been publicly displayed, the specificity of her points of view becomes even more evident.

The exhibition opens with a wall of small, square, framed black and white photographs, some from the mid 1990s, others like the portrait of *Stanya and Harry* is from 2005. In these intense images Opie captures not only the love amongst the individuals depicted, but also their openness and trust of her, the image maker, exposing their vulnerabilities and personalities. In these photographs the setting was controlled as most were shot in a studio against a neutral white/gray backdrop.

Both color and black and white images are on view, and while they are not arranged chronologically, the installation is grouped somewhat thematically with occasional one-offs or anomalies that reference both well-known series like *105 Freeway* (1994) a large-scale black and white print of the empty 105 freeway which was constructed in 1993 and more singular images like *6th Street Bridge Construction* (2022), a color photograph documenting the bridge under development.

A few photographs resonate personally — *Tony Greene's Studio, September 12, 1990* — a picture of postcards and image fragments on the wall of her friend and late artist Tony Greene's studio around the time he passed away from AIDS, as well as beautiful early portraits shot in the late 1980s and early 1990s of Richard Hawkins, Judy Bamber, Bill Jones, John Greyson and Matias Viegner, artist friends and CalArts professors.

Opie's sensitivity to her subjects dominates in these intimate portraits and while she is better known for her documentation of figures in the S&M scene, gay bars and queer domestic spaces, it is the less bombastic, more subtle images of those close to her that resonate and illustrate a broad sense of community. The exhibition does include numerous nudes — some like *Gay Pride Day* or *Yes Ma'am* are overtly sexual, while others like *Pam shaving* (all 1990) depict a private moment now made public.

The never before seen video *Making of Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) is a thirty-one minute documentation of the making of one of Opie's most iconic images — a color photograph of the artist, shot from behind against an ornately patterned deep green fabric that depicts her back, which has been incised with a crude, childlike drawing of two women holding hands under a

cloud and next to a simple house. The image is “quintessential” Opie — rough and tender simultaneously. The hard-to-watch footage documents the process of slicing her back with a scalpel, wiping off her blood and washing her back with antiseptic— refusing to mask the pain while acknowledging the pleasure of the process.

Opie is unabashed about her personal life and these images reveal conflicts as well as triumphs. Throughout her thirty-year career she has faithfully documented a wide variety of subjects — from intimate moments with her son or lovers, to incidents of street violence, urban construction as well as destruction and the joy of letting go and dancing in a club. To her credit, she has refused to be pigeonholed as a certain type of photographer and this has allowed her the freedom to traverse the world photographing that which appears before her. This heartfelt exhibition attests to her commitment to show the world as she sees it and how it is.

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