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Transcript #70 Investigating America with Artist Catherine Opie



Guest Catherine Opie. Photo Charlotte Burns

Published 14 November 2019 in [Podcast Transcripts](#)

Charlotte Burns: Hello and welcome to *In Other Words* where we cover everything you ever wanted to know about the art world but didn't know who to ask. I'm your host, Charlotte Burns, and today I am joined by the artist [Catherine Opie](#), whose work documents and investigates American life, landscapes and identities. She's also a tenured professor of photography at the [University of California](#) here in Los Angeles.

Catherine Opie: *There's shitty books, there's shitty movies, there's shitty art. And then there's all the pearls in-between that actually move people.*

Charlotte Burns: Before we get into the episode, here's a reminder to subscribers to our *In Other Words* newsletter at artagencypartners.com. And now onto today's show.

Thanks for being here, Cathy.

Catherine Opie: Oh, thank you so much for having me, Charlotte.

Charlotte Burns: You and I spoke a few months ago—we did a data study looking at the representation of women in the art world—

Catherine Opie: Absolutely.

Charlotte Burns: —and it was so foundational for me to be able to talk to you. You were happy, grateful that you'd made a life in art, but you felt that you had fewer opportunities compared to your male peers. And it was so interesting having that conversation with you because most other people we were talking to felt surprised like, "Is the data right? We feel we're making more change than this." But you knew it. Whereas the people working in the art world to support artists did not.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, I think that is interesting. I feel like they are actually trying to create more equity in relationship to representation. The directors and the curators within, they're already punching those numbers and trying to fill these different gaps with a certain kind of consciousness.

But when you're in the world and you're part of academia—I've been teaching for 30 years—you see it within your own students. I know my male students have had a lot more opportunity than my female graduates, and I don't know how to further promote that or change that in any kind of way. There's a certain disabling factor that you feel as a professor knowing, as you put people forth into the world, that some people have a larger voice than others. So, I think it's great that you're data-mining in this way because maybe they'll even work a little bit harder.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. You're an incredibly respected artist, you've had real success—

Catherine Opie: —Oh, thank you.

Charlotte Burns: —And yet you and many of your peers discuss the fact that often you'll be given survey shows. You've never, in your career had a curator come to your studio and say, "Let's make an exhibition at the museum about a new body of work."

Catherine Opie: Yeah, that's true, I haven't had that yet. I think that maybe in speaking it maybe, you know, I always feel like if you put something out in the universe as a statement, possibly things come back to you. But I haven't had that opportunity where I've been making a body of work and it just ends up in a museum. I mean, there's one case: "[700 Nimes Road](#)" (2010-11) did end up as a single body of work at [MOCA, at the PDC](#), Pacific Design Centers.

Charlotte Burns: Do you feel that's different for male artists?

Catherine Opie: That's a good question. I think so a little bit, yeah. When I think about different people that I know in terms of how they work. They can all of a sudden be given over a huge space and be able to do a vision of something, and that it's not based on just a survey show or retrospective. But space is given over to actually do things on large scale, more so definitely with male artists than female artists.

Charlotte Burns: It's interesting because that perpetuates the problem. If any artist, they're just getting surveys shows, then their narrative is just tidy and tied-up-with-a-bow and done and over there. Whereas if you're getting to present new thoughts in a big space, then you get to be seen differently. You get to be seen as dynamic, as someone who's ceaselessly being creative.

It also impacts the market—

Catherine Opie: —Yeah

Charlotte Burns: —that there's another event for collectors to get behind, for museum patrons to support, for private buyers to be interested in as well. We talked a little bit about the market and pricing. Are you aware of a disparity with your work compared to peers?

Catherine Opie: Yeah, I would say that I'm fairly aware of it, but I'm also incredibly grateful that I make any money at all off of being a photographer. I mean, my parents wanted me to be a kindergarten teacher, go into real estate, so the fact that I've been able to actually provide for my entire family, and live comfortably, and own a home, and other things that a lot of artists never get to be able to achieve.

So, in a certain way, I really think that the critique is valid, and it needs to be there, but at the same time I am somebody, as you said, that has been able to achieve an enormous amount in my field. And so, there's a certain kind of contradiction for me in that I'm very comfortable, but at the same time I'm utterly aware of the disparity.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. You brought up the work to do with [Elizabeth Taylor](#), “700 Nimes Road” (2010–11), and this was a body of work you did where you photographed her possessions.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, her home and her still lives and possessions.

Charlotte Burns: It’s a portrait of her through all of the things around her.

Catherine Opie: Yeah.

Charlotte Burns: I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the timing of that. You took those photographs, and it happened to be the months leading up to her death.

Catherine Opie: Right.

Charlotte Burns: And then I was also thinking about your “[Wall Street](#)” (2001) photos that you were shooting, and then 9/11 happened.

Catherine Opie: —That’s true, then 9/11 happened.

Charlotte Burns: —So you were dealing with something that was alive and then a ghost. How was it being in the middle of that, going that transition from documenting to memorializing?

Catherine Opie: That’s a really hard position to be in because that’s not the intention of the body of work when you begin. So, then what do you do with that body of work in relationship to the fact that it’s going to be read differently because it becomes a memorial? I tried to be very careful with still having the original intention of an extended portrait of Elizabeth Taylor that most people wouldn’t have seen: what happens when there’s a certain kind of rawness of life in relationship to the objects?

“[Wall Street](#)” was part of the “[American Cities](#)” (1997–present) body of work. I was living in New York at the time, teaching at [Yale](#) and literally I had finished, three weeks, and then 9/11 happened. I really struggled with what that body of work meant at that period of time because Wall Street then was completely changed—and still completely changed forever and symbolically.

But I’ve always been interested in the idea of what happens to the boom and bust of America economically in relationship to our cities and how we hold place, and how we think about it. This is obviously something that’s a huge discourse right now in relationship to factories and workers—and different American cities like Detroit trying to come back, or where is St. Louis in relationship to its emptiness, and also its incredible strife in relationship to racism right now in this country? So, all of these bodies of work have really focused on things that I’ve always been interested in, in terms of that specificity of identity.

But the thing that I always thought about photography was that photography wasn’t necessarily for the present. It was actually for the future of looking back to a time. And I would say that with social media, it’s changed it, where I feel like it’s almost like a time travel a little bit. It’s both the past, present and future, always within its ability of what it does as a medium.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, that’s kind of collapsed. This idea of the past brings me on to nostalgia, which I think is part of your work in its truest sense, that it’s a sort of pleasurable, painful, melancholy to look back on things that have gone, and understand the world through objects that remain—that have time traveled, essentially.

I was reading that you have in your studio, a Garfield toy from when you were a kid. You made this work, [The Modernist](#) (2018), in the last couple of years, which is a film about an arsonist who’s obsessed with LA’s landmark houses and then starts burning them down.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, as part of their artwork.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. And so, there’s this intersection between nostalgia and trauma and America, too—specifically America. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Catherine Opie: It’s interesting because I think nostalgia is something that we get caught up in that is often not useful.

Charlotte Burns: It’s often dangerous.

Catherine Opie: It’s often dangerous. One of the things that [The Modernist](#) (2018) was trying to do at the time I was making it was realize that the mantra of “Make America Great Again” was all based on this nostalgic past of America that was ruled pretty much by the wealthy and white men, which it is still, pretty much so today. Although we have a few more women CEOs and so forth in major corporations, but we still have a long way to go.

One of the things that happens within the idea of Modernism is a utopic dream; the idea that with post-World War II, with even [Brecht](#) and [Schindler](#) and [Neutra](#) and so forth, moving to California and this kind of expanse of the West and what the West always did in relationship to idealizing a future— and a future that is based often within the utopic dream that deals with the haves and the have-nots. And the case study houses were absolutely that—you could make houses for everybody that were beautiful and affordable—and we know now in LA that that's all unattainable.

The character is an artist who loves everything about the idea of Modernism, but also is living in one room. It really is this extended portrait of Los Angeles that I've always done. LA is where I've lived for the majority of my adult life now.

So, it's really trying to bring up these complicated questions in relationship to economic dreams and falsehoods that we get set up for—and what is it in relationship to being more community-based that we can break down these notions?

It's a piece that doesn't necessarily have an ending because you don't know what happens. The character just ends holding up a match to a photograph that's ripped. And I like the idea that this character is both a hero and a villain. That they're trans, and what that body holds. Even though most people read it as a male body, it's not necessarily a male body. And so, it ended up holding all these different complicated ideas that I feel like I've been trying to do in various bodies of work but was able to incorporate them within this piece.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. You talk about the idea of community, and that's something that's always been a big part of your work. I think this is where this idea of mapping reality and community come into play. You were a nine-year-old taking photos of your friends when you were growing up, and then you took more photos of your friends, just in different communities, whether it was the S&M community in San Francisco or whether it was your family. It's about this idea of community very much. Do you see that as a driver of your work?

Catherine Opie: I see community as being a way to begin to reach humanity, that without community and without this notion of inner connection, how are we going to ever get to a larger humanity in which we're actually not only caring for the place that we inhabit, but that we're also caring for one another?

Community often had been driven, especially in American culture, through religious institutions. Being a lesbian and growing up in a household that moved from Ohio to California—who had really no sense of community because we weren't affiliated to any religious institutions—I think that I was able to figure out that family went beyond the family unit and that community, actually, is how you build it and make family for yourself.

It, for me, is to get to a better place of understanding ideas and differences. Humanity, to me, is at the core of all of it.

Charlotte Burns: When do you deem something to be successful in that sense?

Catherine Opie: Successful, how do you mean?

Charlotte Burns: In how you define it.

Catherine Opie: I think when you have a certain ability of being aware. I go on Facebook and people are constantly complaining about [Garcetti](#) and what he's doing for the homeless in LA. But I also want to say, well, what are you doing? What are you doing to volunteer? What are you doing to actually help? How can we all actually work together?

We have 55,000 people living on the streets here in Los Angeles—and how absolutely unacceptable that is. It's one thing to complain about the political and the politics in terms of leadership, and it's another thing to be active within it, in trying to find these solutions.

Charlotte Burns: This is something that came up in a podcast we did this week with [Helen Molesworth](#). She'd done an interview with the artist [Andrea Fraser](#), and Andrea had been making the point that there's criticism of the donor class, and yet there aren't that many other people banging down the door to be in the volunteer positions. It got me thinking about the extent to which conversations are solution-focused, because that seems to be something that's increasingly missing in this more polarized society.

Catherine Opie: Right, we have too many talking heads shouting at each other without actually coming together. Before I came here, I was watching C-SPAN's service for [Elijah Cummings](#). What was really beautiful to see was his close Republican friends talking about how important he was as a person for them.

These days you just have this intense fighting without actually getting in and resolving some of the larger problems that we need to really as a society, and as individuals in relationship to being part of a larger community.

So, as museums go free, we should also all maintain our memberships for those museums if we're frequent visitors. If you can afford to go to museums, you should actually be participating in the legacy of what it means to keep these institutions going and the importance of it, in relationship to freedom of speech and what they represent to people in terms of creativity

and thinking.

Charlotte Burns: You've been on different boards—

Catherine Opie: Yeah, I'm on a lot of boards. Yeah.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: I was actually talking to an art dealer this week, I said to him, "I'm interviewing Cathy Opie, what should I say?" And he said, "Oh, that's someone I would love to have on my board. I'd have her on any board because she speaks truth to power, but she *includes* you."

Catherine Opie: Oh, that's a really lovely compliment, actually.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. That's a skill. Does that come naturally to you?

Catherine Opie: I don't know. I guess I've grown into it. I don't know that if I had looked back at my 18-year-old self that I would have seen who I am at 58. I would absolutely not recognize the same person because of life, and what life brings to you and how you go through a path.

I've always been dedicated to the idea of collective wellbeing. I've always been incredibly aware of politics. My father had a really large political campaign collection that I grew up with—

Charlotte Burns: I read about that—

Catherine Opie: That was actually really important in understanding a history within America.

I think that if you're brave enough, go ahead and use your voice even if people aren't maybe necessarily appreciating everything that you're bringing to the table. We actually have to be able to begin to articulate what's happening and try to create some kind of collective relationship to making a better society.

Charlotte Burns: From that museological point of view, what do you think those immediate challenges are and how are you thinking about broaching them?

Catherine Opie: Well, transparency I think is very important, and that's something that we worked really hard on in terms of the board at MOCA.

And I felt like at times, without saying things that I'm not supposed to be saying, when [Klaus Biesenbach](#) came in, I did make this pin that was about being united, in a certain way. And I think that you do it through listening and I think you do it through debate. Unless you listen, you really can't understand where another person is really coming from—that you actually really have to hear them and hear their opinions. Everybody's going to fight with you about what they want, period, in life. Most people are somewhat solipsistic in which they're going to enter the world in that way. It's like, "No, this is my opinion. I am right. I want it to be this way."

Artists are really fortunate in which that our work provides us that platform.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, you get to do that.

Catherine Opie: We get to do that all the time within the privacy of our own minds. Then all of a sudden, it becomes public what we put forth, and then the debate comes. But we've resolved somewhat what we're trying to get to. In a certain way, because I have so much kind of control in my own practice as an artist, that I'm really interested on a museum level, not necessarily control, but what is it as a collective unity to uphold the values that we're trying to bring forth in relationship to art. And that it's an incredible, powerful messaging medium, actually.

It might not even message all the time. It might just be looking. And that's really good just to remember that we can take a pause and look at something that we might not understand. I don't think that everything should be understood in life, I don't believe in juxtapositions of right and wrong. I actually have a lot of quandary about the idea of truth and what truth is. So, I'm interested in these hierarchies, and the power hierarchies within that, creating an equality. I don't know if that answered your question or not.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, it did brilliantly. Loved it.

[Laughter]

I think that will wash over me in thinking about what that means and what to ask you next. And I guess the thing that was occurring to me while you were talking was this specificity of MOCA. It's an institution that's been through upheaval over the

past decade with financial problems, with chief curators—

Catherine Opie: Directors, so forth.

Charlotte Burns: —and directors and so on and so forth. There were members of the MOCA board who were ideologically opposed to each other as well, maybe more so than other institutions

Catherine Opie: I don't know if that's, true actually. I mean, when you look at the [Whitney](#) board, when you look at [MoMA's](#) board, and you look at the discourse around the board members at this point on an institutional level.

I actually don't know if it's the right thing to do in terms of kicking people out that might have different points of view. I certainly will fight for more peace in this world, and I believe ideologically in things that, again, other people probably don't. But that doesn't mean that you shut down the discourse.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Catherine Opie: My worry in doing that and these divisions, or even in what Trump has done in terms of the division of building a wall—like has that wall in some way created a psychological division for all of us not to be able to actually come together in terms of what real debate does? I'm not interested in necessarily kicking people off, but more interested in the idea of, well, let's have transparency within this and true discussion.

Charlotte Burns: Mhmm, yeah.

But maybe that's too centrist for me in the radical time that we're living in, and I'm thinking about that a lot. Like [I'm] somebody who carved pervert on my chest. Am I radical enough at this point?

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Catherine Opie: I don't know.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: I was going to ask you about that work because I read that you recently said that for you now, that you found it almost too intense to look at. I posted something on Instagram this morning saying, you know, I'm interviewing Cathy Opie, this artist who did [this great work](#) in I think it was 1994—

Catherine Opie: 1994, yeah.

Charlotte Burns: —in which you are bare chested, wearing a leather mask covering your face. You have needles lined incredibly uniformly up your arm.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, I had really good body piercers put them in.

Charlotte Burns: Then this ornate carving into your chest of the word "pervert" in this quite beautiful, flowery, medieval-ish lettering. I tried to post it and it got taken down because it didn't—

Catherine Opie: Yeah, because it has my breasts in it.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. Apparently, it wasn't respectable enough.

Catherine Opie: Yeah. That's what happens.

Charlotte Burns: And I was thinking, you know, that was decades ago, that work.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, it was now.

Charlotte Burns: And it was also about—

Catherine Opie: It was about the AIDS epidemic.

Charlotte Burns: It was about the AIDS epidemic. You want to tell us a little bit about the thinking of that work and the reception to it?

Catherine Opie: This was an incredibly radical time, especially within my life. I mean, I was in my 30s, and I literally had lost a good portion of my community through AIDS.

We were coming off the culture wars and the [NEA Four](#), and we were in a time period in which, being part of [ACT UP](#) and [Queer Nation](#), we were literally fighting for our lives. I wasn't fighting for my life because I was not HIV positive, but that didn't mean that I wasn't going to be part of that fight in terms of the kind of continuation of homophobia and what was happening. And actually, [\[Self-Portrait/\] Pervert](#) (1994) was an interesting reaction because it wasn't a reaction to the right. It was a reaction to my own community.

Charlotte Burns: The respectability pursuit.

Catherine Opie: Mhmm. It was the relationship to all of a sudden, us in the leather community that had been working so hard and fighting for our own kind of position that wasn't just labeled in this loose way as perverts. So, it was within my own community in which they were trying to funnel more ideas of family values. Like, no, we have family values; we have religion in our life; we have all of these things in terms of assimilation.

All of a sudden there was this juxtaposition of abnormal and normal, which is always this language that is attached to supposedly deviant beings.

I could have written 'deviant' in my chest too, but my own community was calling me a pervert. So that's why I carved 'pervert' on my chest: not only the relationship of blood, but what is our relationship to language?

I think that it's really important in terms of language and how we use it. We saw President Trump use 'lynching' the other day in a tweet. What did it mean for the March on Washington to all of a sudden create a certain division within the LGBTQ community that created another subset of language of what is normal or abnormal. It was really insulting for me.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. What was the reaction within the community to the work at the time?

Catherine Opie: I don't know. The first place that piece ever showed—I never got to sit with a piece because I made it and it immediately went into the [Whitney Biennial](#) in 1995. I think that people were always really appreciative of my boldness within my community and the fact that I was creating representation. I have so many young people come up to me and say, "I was a kid and I saw your work in the Guggenheim, and you changed my life. I felt like I was given permission to be myself."

Charlotte Burns: That's so rewarding.

Catherine Opie: And that's really what I was always trying to do in relationship to my work. There wasn't representation, unless you just thought of Mapplethorpe. I mean there certainly was representation. I'm not saying I'm the first whatsoever. I come from a legacy of people that have been working on representation. But I didn't feel like it still was enough. I felt like for myself, I had to put myself within my work. That is what you do. You take a stance as an artist and you put yourself in the work, and that was my stance at that moment in 1994.

But the reason why I can't live with it is it's just so raw for me. And also, I remember my son when he was in seventh grade, he was like, "Mom, my friends are Googling you. I really don't know how to explain your work to them." And I was like, "Well, you just tell them that I'm a bad-ass dyke," you know? I don't know what to say, bud, I really don't.

Charlotte Burns: You're loved.

Catherine Opie: You know, it was a piece that absolutely needed to be made, but there are pieces that I don't need to live with. I live with very little of my work hanging in my house. Only two photographs, 20" by 24" Polaroids of Oliver that I took in 2010 or so.

Charlotte Burns: I like that one with Mr. Nibbles.

Catherine Opie: Oh yeah. [Mrs. Nibbles](#).

Charlotte Burns: Oh, Mrs. Sorry.

Catherine Opie: Mrs. Nibbles.

Charlotte Burns: Mis-assigning the rodent gender.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, which is really funny because Oliver had always named his mouse Mrs. Nibbles, and then when I started on the Taylor project, she had written a book about her pet squirrel named Mrs. Nibbles. So synchronicity is an odd thing in the world.

Charlotte Burns: It is an odd thing. Another work I wanted to talk to you about was the, I guess I think of that trilogy of self-portraits that you did the [\[Self-Portrait/\]Pervert](#) (1994), [\[Self-Portrait/\]Nursing](#) (2004)—

Catherine Opie: —[*Self-Portrait/Cutting*] (1993).

Charlotte Burns: And [*Self-Portrait/Cutting*]. They're all in a way this idea of longing and belonging. The cutting is such a moving image. It's this family that you wanted to have, but you felt you might not be able to have. Two women holding hands, two stick figures in skirts in front of a house, and this domestic idyll that you felt was beyond you. Then the *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) is still so powerful, that sort of Madonna and child with you and your son.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, but it's a 40-year-old lesbian who has a lot of marks on my body. It's not the Madonna and child, but it's again, like what do we do with this huge history of representation?

I've always told students, you keep telling me in crit that you want this to be new. It has to be new. I don't know what new means because art is a long conversation. It goes into our minds and into our bodies and physically creates these different ways of thinking. It's like reading a novel, and then you pick up another novel.

Everything is influenced by history to a certain extent. But it's what you do with that history in creating a language around it that you feel that you have your own ownership over it, to a certain extent, or that your real self, your beliefs are represented within your work. That is unique. So, let history actually come along with you in being a very long discourse and conversation you can have.

Charlotte Burns: Who are the people that you look back on that—

Catherine Opie: Oh god, so many. I mean so many different people for different reasons, and that's why my work jumps around. Where people are like, "Oh God, you made this now, huh?" I'm like, "Yeah, I did." It's almost like I have too many things that I'm actually trying to create these longer dialogues with.

But you know, painting is hugely influential in my life. I always look at painting as a place to think about photography to a certain extent. There's moments where the ice houses are white on white, and you can hardly see a house. That's completely thinking about [Ryman](#). The sun and the way that it is in *Twelve Miles To The Horizon* (2009) makes me think of [Turner](#).

Then there's "*American Cities*" (1997-present) that has nothing to do with painting, and it has everything to do with what photography does.

And so, there's bodies of work that are completely steeped within the history of what a photograph does as well as then thinking about a certain kind of language that happens within painting.

Charlotte Burns: You're like a collector of surfaces. You're almost fetishistic about the fabrics and/or textures, whether it's a waterfall or glass or sort of a baroque curtain.

Catherine Opie: Yeah. I'm a bit of a fetishist in that way, which my son also hates that word. He goes, "Mom, you can't use that word."

Charlotte Burns: But what's the word you're meant to use?

Catherine Opie: He said that, "You should just say that 'I like that,' Like with cameras, I have a lot of cameras and I love cameras. [Keith Canham](#) handmade my large format cameras for me, and they're all kiln-dried walnut with aluminum frames. The way that they fold up and the way that they work is to me this amazing object.

It's funny because I was in class the other day, and I went over to the wall, and I reached behind a student's photograph, and I ran my fingers over it. The whole class was looking at me like, what are you doing? And I'm like, "I'm a paper toucher," because I want to know what they're printing on.

Charlotte Burns: I'm a book smeller.

Catherine Opie: It's very tactile for me. I do want people, especially with that Elizabeth Taylor body of work, I want you to almost feel like you can reach out and feel it. You know?

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. You're talking about teaching. I wanted to ask you, you've been teaching for I think three decades. When I spoke to you in the summer, you were saying, "Well, I've kind of been doing it just in case the other thing doesn't pan out."

Catherine Opie: No, no. It's actually because I like teaching, too.

Charlotte Burns: But you like teaching, too.

Catherine Opie: But it is good to have a secure paycheck because you can make whatever you want to make and not have

to necessarily worry.

Charlotte Burns: What are the frustrations of teaching and what are the joys of it?

Catherine Opie: Well, yesterday I came home completely joyful from teaching because I feel like my undergraduate class is just doing such a phenomenal job. Everybody's talking about the images, everybody's giving to one another in crit. There's this really nice synchronicity between myself and the students. I really like it when things flow like that, and I feel like that I can actually be helpful.

Charlotte Burns: Do you ever see something with your students and then incorporate that into your work?

Catherine Opie: No, there's good separation.

I did do a nod to a great student I have right now, Lorena Ochoa, who is amazing. I'm really enjoying her. This is the third time I have her in my class. She's a graduating senior, she's been doing these phenomenal political landscapes and relationship to immigration. So I just finished one of my political collages that'll be in my next show, and I put a little head of John Wayne in it as a nod to her. Because she was using John Wayne as the white figure of the West. So that is really only one incident that I can think of where I wanted to do a nod to a student that I really respected within my own work.

Charlotte Burns: I love the fact that you started making your political collages—a lot of like sitting at a table and cutting out small images—when you moved into this huge new studio.

Catherine Opie: I think this space holds that history too because it was Elliott Hundley's studio—all his work is pins and small cutouts. When I took over his studio, I had no intention of cutting out paper. Then all of a sudden, I'm finding myself, because I had completed *The Modernist* (2018), wanting to have a further conversation with collage. So, there I was cutting out pictures just like Elliot did in this studio.

Charlotte Burns: Engaging with ghosts once again.

Catherine Opie: Exactly. Engaging with ghosts.

Charlotte Burns: I read that it was your father's high school girlfriend, a woman called Eleanor, who said you were really an artist. Your family life—I was reading about your father who collected this political memorabilia. He was violent to your brother, your brother would be violent to you, but later protected you.

Your father had cancer. He moved. The story was that he needed a warmer climate, but you suspected it was to do with the grandfather selling the company out from under him. You moved to California, he married someone crazy but had an affair with your mother.

Catherine Opie: Wow. You dug around in a lot of interviews.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: I was just thinking about that in the context of *[Self-Portrait]/Cutting* (2018) too, because it gave a different slant to that idea of a domestic idyll and how you have to create those things.

Catherine Opie: Yeah. And I think that's one of the things that I kept out of my personal discourse quite a bit, is a history of abuse or family abuse, because also it's so easy to equate that to deviance. It's like, "Oh wow. Yeah, she was beat up. That's why she does this to herself." So I really would've been really careful about that history and relationship to my work because I don't want it to be the idea that that is the symptom of it. Really for me it was blood, and what blood meant at that time.

But there certainly is a certain aspect of ideas of violence that exist within how we carry violence and trauma within the body. So, I think that there's definitely an aspect to it, but for me, I wasn't necessarily thinking of that at that time period.

Charlotte Burns: No, I think I thought more of this idea of longing and the tenderness in your work. The portraits are often acts of love, whether that was when you moved to California and you had a crush on someone and it was a period when you didn't really publicly declare those things. You took lots of photos of her and gave them as a gift.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, Suri.

Charlotte Burns: It was so sweet. Your breastfeeding portrait even the football teams: there's this tenderness—

Catherine Opie: Yeah, the football players are so tender, so tender.

Charlotte Burns: And so I think it was the violence, sure, but underneath it there's this sort of wholesomeness and tenderness.

Catherine Opie: Well, and also that we can't assume necessarily... I remember when I showed [*Self-Portrait/Pervert*] in Whitney Biennial, and then people wanted to interview me. It was my first kind of real publicness and I had to navigate that. All the assumptions of who I was through that image really threw me off. All of a sudden, reporters would be like, "Oh God, it was such a great conversation with you. I was so scared to meet you and you're so nice." And I was like, "Hmm."

But that's the same thing with a high school football player. They come loaded with a certain kind of stereotype, just as somebody who might be involved in the leather community has all these stereotypes.

But where is that core of humanity. How can we just look at a person and try to actually look beyond the stereotypes that are laid on all of us?

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. I was reading about when you moved to San Francisco, and you were introduced to the leather dyke scene at Amelia's Bar in the Mission. You described the women as dangerous and hot. But more for you than the sexual aspect was this idea that these were the leading thinkers of a revolution around women's bodies. You talked about the S&M community is less going to the dungeon and playing games than going to the dungeon and having philosophical conversations—

Catherine Opie: Yeah, very much so.

Charlotte Burns: —Which is this repositioning of something that people outside of that community didn't understand or saw in a certain way. Whereas for you it was like an intellectual, emotional discovery.

Catherine Opie: Very much so. It was about a kind of empowerment and ownership over my own body that I never had been taught or given permission to. So, in a certain way, the relationship of getting into the lesbian leather community—all of us being dykes—was utter love and care in relationship to also how complicated desire and pain and longing and all of that is, and how it gets incorporated in your life. I just learned so much from it.

Those who think of it as deviant or scary—I remember when [Jesse Helms](#) was holding up the [Mapplethorpe](#) photographs—it's like, no, this is the most amazing community of people who are free thinkers, and who are utterly about trying to care for one another to a certain extent.

And that was my experience. I think that's why I started making the portrait specifically of my friends in terms of body modification, was the fact that I wanted the humanity to actually exist within a representation of my own community that I felt so much a part of, and so much love, and also so much lost.

Charlotte Burns: Mm-hmm, yeah. Where do you feel that we are these days in the idea of representation and understanding?

Catherine Opie: I don't know, because I've been raising my kid for the last 17 years and even though I have all my friends still, I really sunk into the first cutting on my back of the two stick figure girls. And between teaching full-time and being an artist, as well, full-time and raising my kid. I've been really doing the hardcore work-domesticity thing for a number of years, and I haven't really been that much in touch with that side of me.

Charlotte Burns: I mean more the way that we see each other.

Catherine Opie: Well, I think the complexities are really important to realize and I think that people are trying to navigate that in different ways. [Ron Athey](#) in his continuing performance is really interesting in queering space.

People like [Julie Tolentino](#) and [Pig Pen](#) are really important artists talking about the limitations of the body in relationship to gender. I would say that the biggest conversation right now has to do more with gender.

People are so upset about bathrooms. Meanwhile, I've been called sir my entire life, and often when I enter a woman's bathroom, they're like, "Um, you're in the wrong bathroom." And I'm like, "Actually I'm not." You know? So, I think it's so interesting how all of these ideas are formed around these simpler gestures, but that they're just because of the fear of actually thinking in a larger way about what gender is, and the freedom in relationship to it that goes beyond biology.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. What are you working on now?

Catherine Opie: Well, I'm making swamp photographs, and I'll go back to Louisiana in March and photograph more swamps. Right now, I have done Florida and Georgia, and those swamps go with the political collages. I'm very, very deep in that body of work, in which I can't even think about what's going to come next.

Charlotte Burns: I like what you said, that this idea of draining this swamp— they're actually quite beautiful places that really don't, ecologically speaking, need draining.

Catherine Opie: No, no. No, and actually they're going to disappear. They're going to go further underwater with the coastal rise. And they're very delicate, very important parts of the ecosystem. The show is called "Rhetorical Landscapes", and that's exactly in relationship to language, and what it does.

Some of the conversations that we've had today in terms of this incredibly discursive environment we're in, without actually trying to figure out how to play all on the same sandbox together. I mean, "Why are we going to Mars? We're given this pretty amazing place, and we're pretty phenomenal biological creatures. So, what are we going to do with that?"

We are facing mass-extinction, and that's for real. We won't survive the higher temperatures as a species. I think the planet will survive. It'll become something different. But humans, nah, maybe not.

Charlotte Burns: And it's also everything that comes with it, when you think of everything that's happening politically, so much of it's to do with migrant crises, and that's only going to increase.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, and they have to stop talking about immigration and talk about migration, because that's what's happening. In the same way that every species moves and migrates in relationship to their habitat. We've now put up these borders and these lines that allow for very little migration, and we've decided to call it immigration and we've decided to build walls instead.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, that's the moment we're in. Do you see it shifting?

Catherine Opie: Depends on if people can have the deeper conversations that are needed to have, and it depends whether politicians can be less narcissistic. It depends on a lot, actually. And I don't know. I mean I didn't think that we'd be here after where we had gotten to. I didn't think we would go this far back.

But again, it's like, how do we actually get people to run for city councils and school boards. I think that it's a long road, and it's not a very nice thing to think about as both a parent and a grandparent. It's very depressing.

Catherine Opie: Sorry, folks.

Charlotte Burns: Do you think that art is a place where people can have that conversation?

Catherine Opie: Art is a place of dialogue. It's always talking to the viewer in whatever way.

Charlotte Burns: Do you have a viewer in mind when you make work?

Catherine Opie: Never. No, sometimes it's for my own community a bit. I wanted it to be for everybody, but I also am very clear in saying that somebody who's homophobic, I don't expect for my work to change their position or their worldview. But it's important that that voice is actually added to the mix.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. Do you have any dream projects that you think about?

Catherine Opie: Yeah, blue. I'm really into blue. [Robin Coste Lewis](#) and I are going to be heading off to Montreal in the next couple of weeks and we're going to be doing a conversation together, and she's just writing about the Antarctic. I think a lot about the color blue, I think a lot of the horizons and oceans for me is this place of pause.

I want to go to Norway, and I want to make blue portraits and blue landscapes in that January, February light. Where it's just this in-between bit of darkness and just the dusk.

Charlotte Burns: Oh, I love that.

Catherine Opie: I think about blue a lot.

Charlotte Burns: Do you have plans for all the works that you own? Would you like something to happen with them—a foundation or anything like that?

Catherine Opie: Well, I've decided that I don't want a foundation.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, why not?

Catherine Opie: I like foundations. I'm on the [Andy Warhol Foundation](#) board and I'm on the [Mike Kelley Foundation](#) board.

I feel so fortunate that I was asked to join this amazing group of people and have these very important conversations. But for myself, it goes back to equity and being a woman. I won't have enough money, really, for a foundation. I don't make that kind of money as an artist to have that kind of legacy. And that's okay, because I'll gift it and I'll figure out what I want to do with it, and certainly what my family wants in terms of my kids. I'm sure that they're going to want certain things that are

important to them but, for the most part I hope to place it in institutions as well as the archival... I don't know, maybe the [Getty](#) will get it. Somebody will get it, and it'll be held all together.

I do want the idea of the archive in relationship to scholarship, and I do want the estate to figure out the relationship to scholarship in supporting institutions of education, which I've been so much a part of in my life.

But as far as a larger foundation, I think it takes really a lot of money to do that properly.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. Would you like to have done that, or have you just waved goodbye to that thought now?

Catherine Opie: I don't know. I don't know what will happen. I mean, I'm going to be 59 in April, so maybe I got another 25, 30 years of life. I'm not really sure. Depends, things happen every day. But I think that I really would like it more to be for scholarship in some way, and I don't want to necessarily have my children have to manage my legacy. I don't think it's very fair for children of artists to have to deal with it all. They have to have their own ideas and their own lives, and be their own people.

Charlotte Burns: Mm-hmm. Well Cathy, someone asked me to ask you a question.

Catherine Opie: I like that. People are giving you questions for me, I like that.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. So one came from an art dealer-advisor-artist himself, [Kenny Schachter](#) who said, "Can you ask Cathy if she's discouraged by the state of the art world?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "I think discouraged by the shitty state of the art world." And I said, "The money, the market, the taste, the..." And he said, "Yes." So he just had a sense that the art world wasn't in a great place. Were you discouraged by that?

Catherine Opie: No, I'm not discouraged by the art world. The art world can always be in a shitty place in a certain way. But you know what? It's a language. There's shitty books, there's shitty movies, there's shitty art. And then there's all the pearls in-between that actually move people, and create a way of feeling like they're thinking, and being part of a larger discourse.

It actually just needs to be really supported in every level and every way. And we all need to be able to do that and figure out how to do it, because we don't want it to be completely just going away, and only also left to the people that can afford it. So what can we do is the question, in relationship to equity in the arts as well?

Charlotte Burns: What can we do?

Catherine Opie: Yeah.

Charlotte Burns: But what do you think we can do? I'm going to get you to solve that now.

Catherine Opie: Well, what we can do is actually invest in it, individually. You need to feel ownership. Because I have people come up to me all the time and they say, "Oh, I can't afford one of your works. I would love to live with one of your works." And I'm like, "I can't afford one of my works either. I can live with it, but I can't afford it as well, just so you know."

But there's things that I do. There's prints that I give out, or for different auctions for different events that people would be able to afford to live with one of my works. I try to donate when I can donate. I think artists are asked a little bit too much for auction these days.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, because you don't get the—

Catherine Opie: I think that that's a problem. I think if the laws were changed where I could actually write off the value, because as an artist I am a philanthropist everybody needs to realize that artists also are just being philanthropists as well—

Charlotte Burns: And asked to give away a lot of work to support various causes.

Catherine Opie: —And asked to give a lot of work away.

Charlotte Burns: But unlike collectors who give works away, you can only—

Catherine Opie: They can write it off.

Charlotte Burns: You can just claim the cost of the material.

Catherine Opie: Yeah, and what, I mean I print it on a piece of Epson paper and that's like 20 bucks. I have my own printer, so I'm not getting it printed. I'm printing it myself.

Charlotte Burns: So maybe even less.

Catherine Opie: So even less. But I think that that kind of changing of laws, and the idea of who's a philanthropist, and I think that we all need to think of ourselves as actually philanthropists. And the hierarchy needs to be toppled to a certain extent.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. I think that's really positive.

I've really enjoyed this conversation.

Catherine Opie: Thank you.

Charlotte Burns: It's encouraging participation, essentially.

So we're at the end of the interview now, Cathy. Did you imagine this life for yourself, and what advice would you give to young artists or young people who want to be in the art world in some way?

Catherine Opie: Well, I think that we often deny everything that we really want, or the parents say, "No, that's not a good idea." And I mean, I didn't get through high school very well at all, I barely graduated out. So all my high school friends are constantly just in shock at my ability to live the life that I'm living.

You mentioned Eleanor saying like, "You're an artist." It was not only her, but realizing for myself that you have to do what you're absolutely passionate about. And whether or not that means monetary success, it certainly means a success in life because you're actually completely involved in a passionate way in your ideas, and trying to make a life for yourself.

And so, I think people really need to follow that, which sounds really hokey because probably there's a lot more practical things. But unless you're passionate and you really believe in trying to create something, and you have the desire to do that, then you're not really fulfilling your life and your own ideas of what you want life to be.

Charlotte Burns: Do you ever have moments in your practice where you don't feel passionate about it?

Catherine Opie: No. I might question it. I might get scared to put it out in the public. My happy place is actually when I'm figuring out my own work. That is my utter happy place, besides with my family. But it really is with the work, and trying to figure out the language.

Charlotte Burns: I read an interview in which you were in a crit with your students, and one of them was saying, "I don't even know how to do this. Maybe I can't even think about being a photographer. It's not working." And you were like, "That's when it's going to get really good, is when it's all breaking down and you have to really figure it out. This is really where you need to keep going."

Catherine Opie: Yeah. I don't think that there isn't anybody who. Even if they go to work at a job that they don't like, they probably try to do something within that job that creates more pleasure for them. So when it's really difficult, that's actually a place to dig in and have more pride, and see how you can make it work instead of giving up. I think we all give up too easily. Why give up? There has to be completion in every action, to a certain extent.

Charlotte Burns: I love that. That's great advice, Cathy.

Great, well thank you so much for being my guest, Cathy. It's been a blast.

Catherine Opie: Thank you, Charlotte.

Charlotte Burns: It's been a real pleasure.

Catherine Opie: Appreciate it.

Charlotte Burns: Thank you.