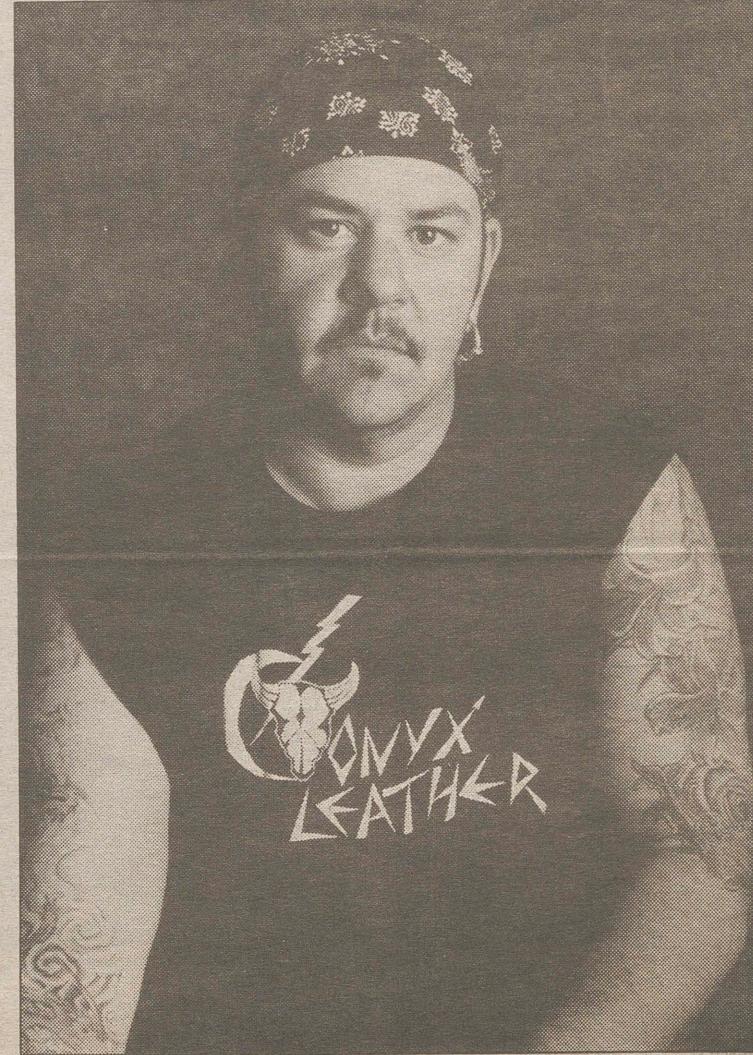
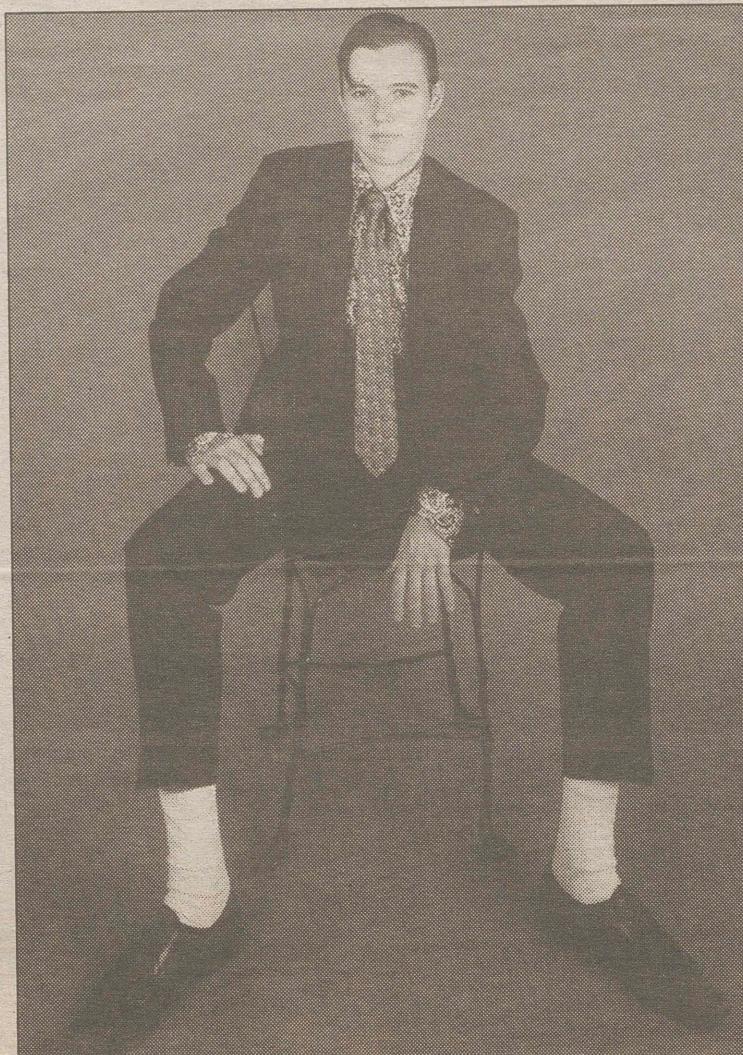


Catherine Opie, below, as her alter ego Bo, says her looks are an expression of control over her body, rather than to gain attention. Among Opie's subjects are "Angela Scheirl," center, and "Sky," right.



Regen Projects

LATIMES  
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# Welcome to Opie's World

By KRISTINE MCKENNA

**C**atherine Opie realized she was a lesbian in high school, but it took her a while to come to grips with the fact. Growing up in Rancho Bernardo, a suburban community near San Diego, Opie was the youngest of two children in what she describes as "a proper family."

"My dad was a very conservative Republican businessman, so obviously I considered it a problem when I realized I was a lesbian," she says.

"I tried to get as far away from home as possible after I graduated from high school because I had a hard time being a kid," she said referring both to school and home.

Moving to San Francisco in the early '80s, Opie put a fair amount of miles between herself and her childhood and began to become comfortable with her sexuality; on her own at last, she also discovered another aspect of her identity.

"I started hanging out with people in the leather community when I was in my early 20s and it

really felt right to me," says Opie, who now lives in lower Koreatown. "At first it was a little scary to me and I thought, 'This is sick, I'm a pervert,' but I soon realized those beliefs were something I'd been taught and they really had nothing to do with the experience I was having. The leather scene was about community for me, and I was inspired by all these people who were giving themselves the freedom to image themselves however they saw fit."

A student at the San Francisco Art Institute at the time, Opie was taking photographs in the social documentary tradition then. It wasn't until several years later, well after she'd earned a master's degree at Cal Arts, that she realized this most personal aspect of her life—her sexuality and the leather community she was part of—could serve as rich raw material for her work.

On view at Regen Projects in

West Hollywood through Saturday, "Portraits" is the first gallery exhibition of Opie's ongoing photographic essay on what some see as the radical faction of the gay community. Among her subjects are Sky and Mike, two female transsexuals who take hormones that enable them to grow beards; male transvestites, and butch lesbians.

Like L.A. performance artists Bob Flannagan and Ron Athey, Opie takes us into an exotic world of elaborate tattoos, piercings, ritualized sexuality, role-playing and cross-dressing. This is likely the most in-your-face contingent of what Opie refers to as "queer culture" (queer is currently the appellation of choice for many gays and lesbians, who use it as a way of reclaiming a word that's traditionally been used derogatorily).

"I don't make myself look this way to get attention," says Opie

who appears in the photograph on the announcement for her show as a mustachioed man named Bo, one of several alter egos she plays with within the context of the leather community. "I do it because it's an expression of having control over my own body, and it makes a statement within my community."

"I started developing personas when I began playing in the leather community in the early '80s, and Bo's a character I just fell in love with," she says, gesturing toward the life-size portrait of Bo on the back wall of the gallery. "He represents the quiet, psychopath side of me and is a way for me to play with ideas Cathy would never be able to play with. I kind of think of him as a serial killer from the Midwest who's a used aluminum-siding salesman," she laughs.

"It's not like I'm playing a character with Bo—he just gives

voice to another part of my mind that I know is there," she adds. "We all have different personas living inside us—I have another one named Mistress Catherine who's a high femme mistress, for instance, and I plan to photograph her soon."

"I decided to make this part of my life the subject of my art because it's what I believe in, and historically, I feel it's important that this body of work be done," says Opie, who supplements her income with a full time job at UC Irvine where she runs the photography lab. "I've never seen portraits like this before that are so loving of the leather community, even though it's existed for a really long time."

**B**orn in Sandusky, Ohio in 1961, Opie describes herself as "kind of a twisted social documentary photographer," who, at age 9, was inspired to start taking pictures after seeing the work of Lewis Hine. "I figured out what child labor laws meant by looking at his photographs and that same year got my own camera and went around documenting my Please see Page 90

# Opie

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neighborhood in Ohio—we lived there until I was 13, when we moved to Rancho Bernardo."

Fleeing Southern California as soon as the opportunity afforded itself, Opie spent an unhappy year of high school at a private girls' school in Virginia, then settled for five years in San Francisco after graduating. During her college years at the San Francisco Art Institute, and later at Cal Arts, Opie admired the discreetly political photographs of artists such as Walker Evans and Dorthea Lange, and took pictures in a similar social documentary vein that explored ideas of community and identity.

"I did a two-year project on the development of master-planned communities and how they've led us to perceive suburbia as a reflection of the '50s," says Opie, "and I also did a series on MacArthur Park and the development of the Metro Rail that was exhibited at Beyond Baroque [in Venice] in 1989. Those bodies of work might not seem to have any connection to the work I'm doing now, but in fact, all my work has been autobiographical," she adds. "The master-planned communities series, for instance, was about me leaving Ohio and going to live in one of them in Southern California."

During the years she was making that work, Opie also took photographs, often of a sexual nature, of her friends in the leather community, but she never considered exhibiting them. "Taking those pictures was a way for me to keep my work connected to my community while I was taking social documentary photographs of other communities, but somehow they never satisfied me as an artist," she recalls.

Opie began to look for a way to interweave the disparate aspects of her life and work during the '80s when artist like Cindy Sherman and Robert Mapplethorpe gained increasing visibility. Sherman's work may be the closest to Opie's in its use of portraiture as a means of exploring issues of identity. Donning a series of disguises and costumes, and frequently impersonating figures from history, Sherman herself serves as the model for all her photographs.

Mapplethorpe, on the other hand, photographed an underground world largely unknown to those outside of it. "Mapplethorpe was the first artist to try to aestheticize the queer community, so he was a pretty big influence on me," she points out. Mapplethorpe's voice does echo ever so faintly in Opie's work—the two artists clearly have similar intentions, but there are significant differences in their work as well.

Both artists' work is rooted in formalism, has a decidedly cool tone and is painstakingly composed; Opie, however, employs blazing color, while Mapplethorpe's most critically acclaimed

work was done in black and white. Then there's the issue of scale—Opie's photographs are approximately life-sized (a strategy that makes them a little bit eerie), while Mapplethorpe's work conforms to the usual scale of photographs. There's a marked difference in emotional tone as well; Mapplethorpe's work is informed by an iciness that's altogether absent in Opie's curiously tender portraits. And finally, Mapplethorpe's portraiture is more sexually explicit and often depicts interactions between more than one subject, while Opie's portraits center on a lone subject who stares into the camera with a neutral expression.

"These aren't snapshots of somebody smiling at a party—these pictures confront you with a straightforward gaze that can be a bit unnerving," Opie points out. "I always give a print to everybody I photograph, and some of my subjects have told me they have a hard time hanging them up at home."

Asked if she sees portraiture of this nature as an open-ended road or as a limited approach destined to exhaust itself, Opie says, "I'll keep taking portraits like this as long as I have images in my head—and the images in my head are sparked by the people I know. These photographs are really a collaboration between my friends and I."

Opie also continues to take photographs of a social documentary nature, and she's currently at work on a series on landscape, Los Angeles freeways, houses built in the Hollywood Hills during the '50s, '60s and '70s, and lesbian domesticity (a series she says is composed of "pictures of women in their homes together"). Her portraits of the gay community, however, are far and away her most critically acclaimed work and have created something of a sensation in the art world. Printed in editions of eight, the photographs on view at Regen Projects are selling briskly, and her solo debut at a New York gallery is slated for the fall.

Asked if she feels the success of this work is attributable in part to the fact that many people may be drawn to it as a kind of freak show, Opie says, "I think this work has gotten more attention than previous bodies of work I've done because I've grown up as an artist. The work is more considered, and speaking purely in technical terms, the photographs are simply better. Of course, you can't discount the subject matter, and some people probably do come expecting a freak show, but if they're genuinely interested in art and they look at it with any care, I think the work becomes something more than that for them."

"The work elicits a diverse range of responses," she continues, "but most straight people I've talked to said they appreciated its dignity and honesty. Yes, some people are threatened by it—we're taught that when we get a wound or scratch our knee, something's wrong, so obviously many people

are going to be disturbed by the things that are done with the body in the leather community. But amazingly enough, I've never been attacked for my work on grounds of content."

"Historically, lesbians haven't had a culture," Opie points out. "Gay males have a well documented history that stretches far back into history, but lesbians have been invisible within that culture—this is something that's changed radically over the past 10 years."

Lesbians may have gained a higher profile in mainstream culture over the past 10 years, but the existence of female-to-male transsexuals within the lesbian community will still no doubt come as a surprise to some (the lesbian transsexual community includes women who use hormones in order to develop secondary male sexual characteristic, as well as women who use hormones in tandem with various cosmetic surgical procedures).

"Female-to-male hormone use is a procedure that started about five or six years ago, and though some people within the lesbian community condemn it, the leather community has embraced it because they've always supported anything having to do with the freedom to change one's body and appearance," Opie explains. "People should be aware, however, that this is not a fad—this is a process that people think about for a really long time before committing to it."

One could make the case that an artist's sexuality comes into play in his or her work regardless of intent; nonetheless, in this era of political correctness, one often hears such phrases as "lesbian art" bandied about. Asked if she believes there is such a thing (a question that's explored in depth in the June issue of *Art in America*, which features interviews with 12 gay and lesbian artists), Opie says, "There's a lesbian aesthetic, just as there's gay camp, but I don't know if there's such a thing as 'lesbian art.' There've been quite a few shows in recent years curated around the theme of lesbianism, and while those shows are valuable, they also ghettoize the work they're showing."

"When I first started making work I tailored it for the heterosexual community because I was terrified I'd never have a career if I didn't," she concludes, "but I've come to believe that the role of a gay artist in a predominantly heterosexual culture is to remain true to themselves and their beliefs. Things have changed a lot for gays and lesbians over the past decade, but it's still a big deal to be queer. You can still get bashed and there's still an enormous amount of consciousness raising to do."

Catherine Opie's "Portraits" continues through Saturday at Regen Projects, 629 N. Almont Drive, West Hollywood, (310) 276-5424.

Kristine McKenna is a frequent contributor to Calendar.