

Catherine Opie's 700 Nimes Road review – LA's triple-threat shines like a diamond

Moca Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles Opie's photography is having a moment with three separate LA shows. The latest focuses on the enduring appeal of Elizabeth Taylor – and her famous jewelry

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Usually people are the subject of Catherine Opie's photography, even when there's no one there. Her images of 700 Nimes Road are of a well-kept home and the rarefied belongings therein. But as we stumble through photos of sun-sparkled jewelry, luxurious dresses, furs and Oscar statuettes, an impression of the late Elizabeth Taylor begins to materialize.



Catherine Opie's Holiday Ornament (2010-2011).
Photograph: Catherine Opie

At Los Angeles's Moca Pacific Design Center until 8 May, the still-life series – shot between 2010 and 2011 – composes a portrait every bit as telling as Opie's concurrent show a few miles west at the Hammer Museum (until 22 May). The 12 comparatively conventional portraits here form a circle of her artist friends including Matthew Barney, John Baldessari, Kara Walker and others set amid chiaroscuro lighting that makes them seem to glow from within, an apt metaphor for the inner life of the artist.

If these renowned faces make up her current tribe, the seven black and white images from the O Portfolio at Lacma, running until 15 September, provide a glimpse of her old tribe, the lesbian bondage community in San Francisco where Opie went to school in the 80s. She still has the scars to remind her – a picture carved into her back of two stick-figure girls holding hands in front of a house, and over her left breast the word “pervert” is carved – both the subjects of photos from that period, which are surprisingly sensual, featuring tools of pain, drips of blood and a subtle smile of satisfaction.

“I’ve always taken an approach in relationship to the history of painting, but there are moments throughout my career in making portraits that I’m really talking about what photography can do,” says Opie, who is having a moment with three shows in LA, one in New York, and a major commission at LA’s federal courthouse to be installed this spring. “I ask a lot of questions about how portraiture functions - what is there to describe the person or the time we live in or a certain set of politics, or how potentially a snapshot can invoke a different way of looking at an image.”

In 1984, American photographer William Eggleston arrived with his camera at Graceland in Tennessee. A Memphis son, he knew the place well. But with Elvis’s death seven years earlier, the rock legend’s personal touch barely registered in what had become an institutionalized tourist attraction.

Eggleston’s photos inspired Opie, who never got to meet Taylor, though she admired her work in film and her Aids activism. There was no need to meet the movie icon, just as Eggleston never met Elvis. But by shooting an occupied home, she hoped to capture the essence of the owner in a way Eggleston couldn’t at Graceland.

On 23 March 2011, Taylor died of congestive heart failure at the age of 79. Opie was still photographing as the project changed before her eyes. High points of the exhibit include a photo of Warhol’s famous portrait of Taylor, which also includes Opie’s reflection, neatly tying the three artists into one work. The show climaxes with the discovery of Taylor’s priceless jewelry collection, which was thought to be in a bank vault somewhere in Beverly Hills, not stuffed away in the closet.

“I went into that room and opened drawer after drawer and it was like beyond what I even imagined,” says Opie, noting that it wasn’t necessarily the bling that drew her attention. “The labeling through the years on the boxes, I just became very touched by that,” she says noting how essential the human element was in order for the project to succeed. “The tape and the handling and the rips in the corners and everything shows a person loving something so much that there’s wear on it.”

Taylor wasn’t kidding when she said: “Big girls need big diamonds.” And Opie found them to be a perfect metaphor for the movie star’s passing, shooting them out of focus, capturing their essence in soft, dappled light.

“They’re about placing it as memory, moving light,” she says, recalling the day Christie’s came to take them away. She might have shot them in focus, but then they would have looked like an item in a catalogue. By shooting soft, she compels the viewer to take a moment to recognize what they’re looking at. It’s a quandary Opie’s been grappling with in an era of ubiquitous images we consume at a single glance.

“I think that it’s about artists realizing that they can use other components in relationship to what they’re representing to get people to actually stand before things and look at it a little longer.”

The same concept is at work in her collection of portraits at the Hammer. Taking a cue from Robert Mapplethorpe's portrait of Alice Neel, Opie tried to photograph familiar subjects in unfamiliar ways. John Baldessari resembles an elder statesman in his photo, which, in Opie's eyes, he is, having met him when she first arrived on the LA art scene some 30 years ago.

She found model-turned-artist Matthew Barney difficult to photograph because his good looks mask the vast internal creative space Opie sees in his work. "He's the pretty boy artist, but when I think about somebody like Matthew Barney, I'm like how can I almost create what we would consider iconic to him but shows that internal space?"

While the scale and lighting of the portraits appear to be inspired by a Leonardo da Vinci show she attended at the National Portrait Gallery, a greater impression was made by the people lined up outside waiting to get in. It's a conversation with history Opie is accustomed to having, only this time she wonders if people will ever queue up to spend as much time viewing a photograph as they do a painting.

"She's an artist who has a lot of images in her head and imagines the work to be in dialog with the whole history of western image production," says Moca curator Helen Molesworth, who teamed up with Hammer curator Connie Butler to make the Opie double-bill possible. Both are institutions on which Opie is currently or has been a board member. "She's interested in a different kind of temporality to the photograph. It's more on par with painting in that regard."

An outlier amid the portraits is a grand scale image of Yosemite's Bridalveil Fall. Like Taylor's diamonds, it too is out of focus. And while it's impressive in scale, it is only a study for the six-story mural of Yosemite Falls that Opie will install this spring in LA's recently completed federal courthouse. Photographed in six segments, the out-of-focus falls will cascade down the walls of the atrium to the ground floor where it will reflect back on itself in a pool of water.

"When one loses life's liberty, do you not then have a reflective moment?" asks Opie, happy with the metaphor but still grappling with the larger issue of maintaining an original amid an ocean of photo-images.

"How do you deal with national parks, which are so iconic in the history of photography, to allow a different way to look at it?" She pauses then shakes her head. "I'm always trying to tackle how to reposition the cliché in what is iconic with making images."

Catherine Opie: 700 Nimes Road runs until 8 May at Moca Pacific Design Center; Catherine Opie: Portraits runs until 22 May at Hammer; and Catherine Opie: O runs until 5 September at Lacma