

**Catherine Opie's three self-portraits:**  
**"Let's push the boundaries a little here**  
**about what you guys think normal is."**

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**Résumé**

Les autoportraits de Catherine Opie forment une série qui peut être interprétée comme une autobiographie photographique, faisant la narration d'années passées à défier les limites d'une société normative qui cherche à exclure de son sein les communautés *queer*. Son combat contre les limites, les tabous et les normes de représentations de la société américaine nous permet de mieux connaître et comprendre cette société et ses évolutions. Opie n'hésite pas à mettre en scène son propre corps dans des autoportraits qui relèvent aussi de la performance, où la peau est malmenée, où le sang et le lait humains coulent littéralement, pour mettre en lumière son cheminement de femme homosexuelle, d'abord rejetée par une société conformiste et homophobe, puis trouvant finalement sa place grâce à la maternité mais surtout grâce à l'art, en ce qu'il permet l'assimilation/sublimation des insultes préalablement réservées à sa différence, à sa soi-disant perversité. Le travail d'Opie est donc à la fois un travail subversif et constructif : subversif, car il remet en cause un état de choses établi en matière de représentation, et constructif car, plus que de le détruire, il le complexifie, lui fait tendre à une plus grande universalité et par là participe à un travail d'évolution des mœurs de la société américaine.

**Abstract**

Catherine Opie's self-portraits, in a kind of photographic autobiography, narrate her life-long challenge of the boundaries established by the conventional American society and its attempt to ostracize the queer community. Her fight against the limits, taboos and representational norms of the American society allows us to better understand this society and its evolutions. Opie often uses her own body in self-portraits that are also performance art, in which the integrity of the skin is jeopardized, in which real human blood and milk flow. Her purpose is to emphasize the key moments of her life as a homosexual woman, at first rejected by a conformist and homophobic society, and finally finding her place in society, thanks in part to her maternity, but mainly through art, which allows the assimilation/sublimation of the insults previously aimed at her difference, her so-called perversity. Opie's work is much more than subversive: it does not only try to undermine or destroy the established facts of representation, but attempts to redefine them, to make them closer to universality, hence contributing to the evolution of the mores of the American society.

**Mots clés :** autoportrait, queer, féminisme, politique, normalité, homosexualité, traumatisme, lesbienne, SM, sadomasochisme, homophobie, SIDA, Culture Wars, colère, maternité, Vierge à l'enfant, fierté.

**Keywords :** self-portrait, queer, feminism, politics, normality, homosexuality, trauma, lesbian, SM, homophobia, AIDS, Culture Wars, anger, maternity, Virgin and child, pride.

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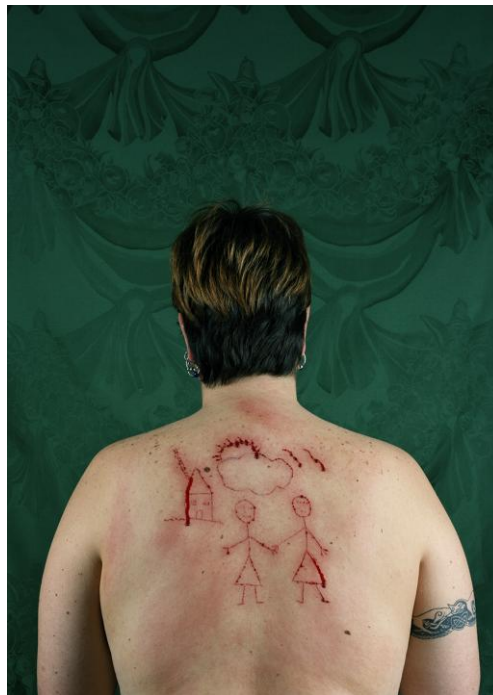
The famous 1960s and 1970s feminist assertion that “the personal is political” seems nowadays slightly trite. It remains relevant however, especially in the case of American photographer Catherine Opie, for whom the American nation is represented, paradoxically, in her most personal, even intimate works, her self-portraits. Other works from her series, such as her urban or semi-rural landscapes, or her portraits of drag kings and queens, performers, intersex people who redefine the social and sexual limits of acceptability, also contribute to the recording of the evolution of the American nation and its photographic representation. But in her self-portraits the political urgency of her work can be felt even more acutely.

Catherine Opie was born in 1961 in Ohio and studied photography in San Francisco in the eighties. She is now a prominent documentary photographer and professor of photography, and had a mid-career retrospective at the Guggenheim museum in 2008. Her work echoes many other famous photographers: the typology of the Bechers, the intimacy of Nan Goldin's portraits of friends, the social involvement of nineteenth century Lewis W. Hine, the outspoken queer eroticism of Robert Mapplethorpe. But Opie's photography is always characterized by an urge to, as she says in a CalArts Master Class lecture available online, “put [her] politics out there”, and her politics always have a strong sense of place, as shown by another of her mottoes: “My work is always close to home” (Blessing, 2008, 23). Among her several series, the body of works entitled *Self-Portraits and Dyke*, a short series of four photographs, was exhibited as a sequence in her Guggenheim retrospective, and published in a separate chapter of her monograph. The self-portraits in the series give a redefinition of our perception of normality, but they also emphasize the political potential of her work through the use of the artist's own body. Opie's self-portraits are shaped by their political context and social environment, but they also, more importantly, attempt to reshape them.

A study of Catherine Opie's self-portraits will strive to explore the potential of photography, and, more specifically, self-portrait, to show how to articulate resistance against the American society.

The first image of the series, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, can be interpreted as the expression of the traumatic experience of being gay in the American nineties. But it can also be seen as a metaphor for a society that feels disquiet in its margins. *Self-Portrait/Pervert* is the epitome of the scope of the insult, which attempts to create a social hierarchy, the people called "pervert", for example, being perceived – and perceiving themselves – to have a lesser social value. *Self-Portrait/Nursing* is a take on some of the iconic values of American society: religion, childhood and womanhood.

### ***Self-portrait/Cutting: the trauma***



#### **Bloody mise-en-abîme.**

In the photograph entitled *Self-portrait/Cutting*, shot in 1993, Opie presents her own back, with a particular kind of wound: a depiction, carved with a scalpel in the artist's very skin, of a lesbian couple in stick figures. The contrasts between the gruesome technique, the childish rendition, and the idyllic scene depicted are striking. The fresh blood trickling and the traumatized red skin around the cut testify of the reality of the action depicted. The female gender is signaled by the women's symbolic childish triangular skirts, they are smiling under a shining sun and two seagulls in the background emphasize the theme of love and companionship. Here Opie takes the cliché of the female body as a blank canvas for male

viewers to inscribe their fantasies upon quite literally, in a self-reification that is both intimate and political. It is intimate, because the idea of drawing on the skin with the blade of a scalpel is a sadomasochistic sexual practice. It is also political, a strong declaration of agency, because it demonstrates that there is no need for a male viewer or a male artist to turn the “huddled and defenseless” naked female body into the “balanced, [...] re-formed” body of the artistic nude. (Clark, 1956, 1990, 3) But a parallel with the classic associations of art history does not cover all the networks of meanings and implications featured in this photograph, which constitute an important chapter both in the artist’s autobiography, and in her country’s history.

### **American lesbian**

In an interview with Russell Fergusson, Opie explains the origins of this self-portrait: the inspiration for it came after a trauma, the failure of a stable relationship with another woman. “The stick figures and house express yearning for domestic bliss, which seemed so elusive after her recently failed relationship” (Blessing, 2008, 15). We see here the interplay between the personal, the artistic, and the political: from an intimate event, a break-up, a work of art with deep political implications arises. Indeed Opie seems to express a feeling of not having the right, as a gay woman, to a domesticity that seems so natural to any straight American, the hurdles for lesbians being apparently more daunting than for other social groups. This impression is emphasized by her position in the photographic representation, her back to the camera, turned to the wall like an outcast. Indeed, in the context of the American nineties and its growing homophobia, many aspects of a lesbian relationship are doomed, which may explain her revolt. In 1993, equal rights for gay families were hardly on the agenda. The World Health Organization had just removed homosexuality from its list of mental diseases, a bittersweet event for the gays who had grown up under the impression that their penchants were a symptom of madness. Not only that, but the initially progressive measure taken by the Clinton administration, about homosexuality in the military, the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” doctrine passed in 1993, was soon proving to also have oppressive outcomes. It condemned the sexual minorities to an unhealthy secrecy and the debates around this policy led to the outright expression of homophobic discourses.

The political context of the nineties is thus inscribed in this self-portrait which can also be read philosophically.

### **Social body**

If *Self-portrait/Cutting* can be interpreted as the outlet for the specific traumas of both a break-up and a feeling of being rejected by society, a more general philosophical reading could be suggested. Here Opie’s body might be seen as a synecdoche for a social system, both vulnerable and dangerous at its margins (Butler, 1990, 175 to 180). In Opie’s case, the cuts in the body are subversive because they disrupt a system that is supposed to be self-contained; they create taboo openings in a body that must remain closed. The margin of the body is of course the skin, and the open skin is the locus of contamination, as we should keep in mind that the nineties were the years in which the AIDS epidemics was confirmed as a major public health issue. Other artists of the eighties and nineties, Andrés Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, Ron Athey, were in the middle of public debate with their use of bodily fluids and excretions

in a way that was unheard of and unacceptable at the time. The trespassing of a limit, a hole in a body, is thus a concrete source of danger, a danger that is double: danger to the punctured body, and danger to the bodies that are likely to come into contact with its contaminating fluids. In the controlled environment of the photographic studio and the performance, Opie transcends and sublimates the fear of the body's precarious boundaries. She transcends it, because she probably overcomes a natural degree of fear of being cut, of pain, of bleeding. She sublimates this fear by taking her pain and pleasure to the higher realm of art. This photograph plays with the tropes of the inner and outer: the body shows on its surface the blood of its hidden depth, in the same way as art makes the hidden lesbian visible.

Opie's body is also a synecdoche for a whole society whose margins, that is to say whose sexual (but not only) minorities, suffer under a regime that does not accept them. It gives a graphic representation of the danger of the intrusion of sexual minorities into the white middle-class protestant heterosexual society. When she cuts her body open to depict a lesbian couple, Opie creates an extended metaphor between blood and homosexuality. Blood should remain hidden under the skin in the same way as homosexuality should remain hidden under the conventions of propriety. Revealing your homosexuality is both painful like a cut, if it has consequences of rejection and social stigma, and pleasurable like an erotic ritual if it is met with the acceptance of your community. Besides, with the AIDS epidemics, blood, homosexuality and contamination will come to be intricately linked, and Opie's use of her own blood in her self-portraits is a reminder that although the gay community is a high risk community, it nevertheless has the right to self-expression and to an artistic self-representation, it should never be shamed into silence. This will be all the more apparent in *Self-portrait/Pervert*.

### ***Self-portrait/Pervert: the anger***



## **Leather dyke art**

In *Self-portrait/Pervert*, dated from the following year, Opie presents the front of her body, bare-chested, with a black SM hood covering her face and dozens of syringe needles stuck in her arms. As in her previous self-portrait, her body bears a cut. The word "Pervert", underlined with ornate foliage, is etched like a heraldic blazon on her chest. The position of the artist/model, sitting with her hands folded in her lap, is the epitome of stability and calm, the composition is very formal, belying the torture she is submitted to. Besides, her choice to hide her face with the hood makes the image more universal: the viewer can imagine the face, even maybe the expression they want, teeth grinding in pain or ecstatic expression of pleasure, or anything else. The elaborate staging is a way to transcend the negative reality of pain into the positive reality of plastic beauty. This is the interpretation that Opie endorses:

I wanted my identity to be hidden, but yet I would wear what people would call me on my chest, reclaiming it in the most elegant and beautiful way. There's a dual thing that happens in this self-portrait. Because of the cutting and the needles, it shocks people. But it's so elegant, it makes them come back. They end up being able to deal with it. (Muchnich quoted in Blessing, 2008, 72)

If many aspects of this photograph denote a masochistic eroticism, it would nevertheless be an oversimplification to reduce this photograph to the personal documentation of alternative sexual practices. First, the size of the exhibited print is monumental, it is more than one meter in length, a strong indication that this picture has nothing to do with the smallness usually associated with intimacy. The staging guides our perception of this quite violent image. The striking gold lamé of the backcloth echoes the silver glitter of the SM regalia, and it is printed with leaves that have the same shape as the leaf cut on her chest. This leaf shape is a sign of the care with which the performance was imagined. Although the set-up of the self-portrait originates in a sexual practice, it has none of the spontaneous, snapshot quality one could associate in imagination to a backroom or a "dungeon" encounter (White, 1994, 56 to 66). Besides, even if she is the one subjected to a degree of physical pain, she does not relinquish the control of the photo shoot: her instructions were to be carried out. The leaf is also a symbol: it may mean that homosexuality is a natural phenomenon contrary to the homophobic discourses contending that being gay is against nature. Finally, the echo of the leaf-shapes of the backdrop on the photographer's chest could mean that the so-called perverts are a part of the social landscape, they are in the décor even if they are camouflaged. The motto of the LGBTQ activist organization founded in 1990 Queer Nation, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it", is a subtext of the photograph.

## **Culture War Goddess**

Jennifer Blessing, in the text that she devotes to the Opie retrospective in the Guggenheim museum, shies away from the interpretations involving Opie's sexuality, and rather chooses to underline how this image could represent the anger and aggressiveness of a war goddess (Blessing, 16) The needles, the hidden face, the blood inscription, are signs of mystery and courage. She obviously wants to establish her physical, moral and mystical superiority over her enemies. Opie said that this self-portrait expressed anger, a need to protest against what was happening culturally in the US, because it was photographed in a political context that

was unfavorable to artists, especially those at the margins of society, and whose works were not deemed proper. We are here in the midst of the Culture Wars, the crisis in American cultural and artistic policies that occurred in the early 1990s, shortly after 1990, when a curator of Mapplethorpe's exhibition *The Perfect Moment* in Cincinnati was sued for pornography and the exhibition censored; when the Republican senator Jesse Helms made public statements against the gay community and tried to cut the financing of the National Endowment for the Arts, which supported the aforementioned exhibition. (Martel, 2006, pp. 221 to 285.) Jesse Helms also voted against the rise of federal grants for the research against AIDS, under the motive that a disease that was lethal to the gay community should not be eradicated. Here the fetishistic use of needles is a theme linked to the AIDS epidemic, the pain and pleasure associated to the syringe being closely associated to the death drive of the contaminated needle.

### **Resignification of the insult**

The focal point, emphasized by the orientation of the needles, the color, the elaborate typography, is the word "Pervert". The experience of the insult is the most common experience of gays, an insult that draws its power from its acceptance by the social order, and that results in the establishment of a hierarchy in the social structure, the insulted person being made to feel socially devalued (Eribon, 1999, 12). A sign of revolt from the power of the insult is its ironic use. Thus, the oppressed community can appear to identify with the oppressor's vision. In Opie's case, the embrace and glorification of the derogatory term could not be clearer. She posits her perversity, not only as a valid subject of self-representation, but also as a motive for pride and an inherent side of her identity. She says "Well I am a big old pervert. I like things that supposedly aren't within the norm." (Blessing, 104). Here we see a clear reshaping of American society and its norms, as far as what the public of art is used to seeing and considering as art: from a motive of secrecy, shame and possible oppression, the affirmation of a non-conventional sexuality finds an outlet in high art. *Self-portrait/Pervert* has the potential to subvert the politics of representation and acceptance of sexual minorities and subcultures within these minorities. It is similar to Robert Mapplethorpe's famous 1978 self-portrait, in which he represents himself seen from the back, the handle of a whip inserted in his anus. But Mapplethorpe turns round to face the camera with a scowling, ironical face; he wants to appear in control of the joke of the photograph. Opie's choice to hide her face suggests that she accepts a degree of loss of control; she may not be controlling her expression, grimacing in pain or pleasure beneath that mask. To accept this potential loss of control, and still rein it in to make the balanced and deeply meaningful work of art that *Self-portrait/Pervert* is, is one of Opie's most important achievements.

Physical suffering is not a requisite to express a militant attitude in a self-portrait. The last of the series *Self-portraits and dyke*, *Self-portrait/Nursing*, once again puts Catherine Opie's formidable body in the foreground, but on such a different mode from the first two that it cannot but resonate as the coda of the series.

## *Self-portrait/Nursing* - Opie's normality



### **(Un)like a virgin**

If *Pervert* is a war cry against the mainstream establishment, it is also a reaction to the gay and lesbian community's attempts to seek acceptance through the concept of normality, another political issue for Opie who said "*Pervert* was a direct response to the gay and lesbian community beginning to create this rhetoric of being normal. And that really bothered me, because what did that make everybody else?" (Blessing, 2008, 258). She disagrees that normality should be a condition of acceptance by society, and resolutely places herself outside such limiting framework. Even in motherhood when, ten years after *Pervert*, Opie shoots another self-portrait called *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, a reworking of one of the most trite images of religious iconography, that of the Virgin and child. The framing, light, backdrop and size of the print are similar to *Cutting* and *Pervert*. But here, instead of the cuts and the needles, we have an image of profound plenitude, with a blonde baby suckling at her breast. With Opie's appearance, we see how complex the definition of normality can be. She presents herself in the classic position of the Madonna and child, but instead of the image of ideal, disembodied femininity usually associated with the imagery of the Virgin Mary, we here have a very grounded, earthly, human figure. Her age, her weight, her hairstyle, her tanned forearms, her tattoos and her scars all clash with our expectations in virginal representation and create a visual parody which subverts the codes of art history. She keeps the sum of the identities presented in the series of self-portraits on her body: the dream of lesbian domesticity has come true, the child is the living proof of it, but the thin white line of the "pervert" scar remains: Opie has not disowned her belonging in the lesbian SM community



through maternity. She does not choose to hide her torso, she is as proud of her “Pervert” identity as of her “Nursing” one.

## **Politics**

The articulation of art and politics in the works of Opie is not an abstract venture. It is on the contrary very concrete and militant and comes from the need she feels to talk about homophobia in the American culture. Although she is well accepted, both in her neighbourhood and in the art world, she has the feeling that she is “constantly still fighting homophobia.” (Blessing, 2008, 257). To that aim, she shows us a way to vindicate other modes of being that embrace homophobia. Through the violence of the lesbian couple drawn in blood into the artist’s flesh and the assimilation of the insult within her identity, she is able to overcome and transcend the homophobic norms of the American society.

## **Creating the norm**

We see that the violence of *Cutting* and *Pervert* was not gratuitous, but a means to an end to create a corpus of valid but disregarded objects of representation in the American society, or in Opie’s words: “I was trying to represent communities that weren’t being represented, but also in a way to create that representation.” (Blessing, 256). If the leather SM Daddy/Boy community was somehow her family for many years, having a real family did not invalidate her political conscience, but made her strive in creating a representation of the family from within the queer culture, and the internal point of view of her self-portrait echoes the internal viewpoint she gives us of queer culture. If they were at first the subject of other people’s speech, the gay communities can find their voices through bodies of works that are disturbing and aesthetic, intimate and universal, personal and political, like Opie’s.

## **Conclusion: the series as a narrative sequence, its political achievement**

When these three self-portraits are presented together as a sequence, they acquire an obvious narrative value. In *Cutting*, the bliss of domesticity is shown as unattainable, and yet desired so hard that it is carved into flesh. It originates in pain but it is transformed into an erotic and artistic pleasure. Real bliss seems attained in *Nursing*, but in order to reach it Opie had to go through the heightened violence of *Pervert*, the violence of the hidden face, the needles inserted in the arms, the insult inscribed as a blazon on the chest. All those humiliations had to be accepted and transcended in order to turn perversity and exclusion into art. Opie’s self-portraits are like transubstantiation, Christ’s body into host, insult into motive of pride.

Opie’s autobiographical research does not only deal with identity and appearance, it is not a documentation of key moments in the artist’s life. It also has a political agenda, the deconstruction of the taboos of representation in the American society, a redefinition of how norms are used to establish who is a valid subject for representation, a thorough rejection of what is a motive of shame in modern-day America. In her concluding words in a 2008 interview entitled "I have represented America", Opie remarks: “I am an American

photographer. I have represented this country and this culture. And I'm glad there is a queer, out, dyke artist that's being called an American photographer." (Blessing, 259) It may be contended that before her photographic inner journey into self-portraiture and all the redefinition of the norms it entailed, she might not have felt such pride in calling herself a dyke American photographer.

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## **Notice biographique**

Doctorante et professeur agrégé, Juliette Melia enseigne l'anglais dans le secondaire et le supérieur depuis plus de dix ans. Elle poursuit en parallèle une recherche sur la représentation du corps et de l'identité en photographie, dont son sujet de thèse, *Ceci est mon corps : autoportrait, identité et mascarade*, est l'aboutissement.