



Virginia Commonwealth University  
**VCU Scholars Compass**

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2013

# Catherine Opie's Domestic Series

Sara Harney

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

© The Author

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/471>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

© Sara Greene Harney 2013  
All Rights Reserved

CATHERINE OPIE'S DOMESTIC SERIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at  
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Sara Greene Harney,  
B.A., College of William and Mary, 2009  
M.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Director: Dr. Michael Schreffler,  
Associate Professor & Department Chair, Art History

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May, 2013

## Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank several people. I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Michael Schreffler, for advising me throughout this process, and my thesis committee members, Dr. Kathleen Chapman and Dr. Eric Garberson, for being a part of this project and allowing me to see it through to the end. Although he may not remember this, Dr. Garberson once told me that graduate school would be the hardest thing that I will ever do. While at first I was skeptical, I think I now have to agree that this is the hardest thing that I have done, aside from completing a marathon.

I would also like to thank my husband, Ryan, for supporting me along the way through all of the trials and tribulations. You are, and have always been, my biggest distraction, which I love and I would not change for anything.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	v
Abstract .....	ix
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Before <i>Domestic</i> .....	6
<i>Master Plan</i> .....	8
<i>Portraits</i> .....	11
Self-Portraits .....	14
<i>Houses</i> .....	16
Chapter Two: <i>Domestic</i> .....	18
Families .....	19
Couples .....	22
Groups.....	25
Impetus for <i>Domestic</i> .....	25
Chapter Three: After <i>Domestic</i> .....	29
1999 .....	29
<i>Surfers</i> .....	31
<i>Self-Portrait/Nursing</i> .....	32
<i>In and Around Home</i> .....	33

Chapter Four: Lesbian Representation and Challenging Heteronormativity.....	37
Lesbian Representation.....	38
Challenging Heteronormativity .....	42
Conclusion .....	45
Bibliography .....	49
Appendix A: List of Portraits.....	52
Appendix B: Exhibition History .....	54

## List of Figures

- Figure 1. Lewis Wickes Hine, *Cotton-Mill Worker*, North Carolina, 1908. Gelatin silver print, 4 5/8 x 6 9/16 inches. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
- Figure 2. Catherine Opie, *Dad and Mom*, 1970. Black-and-white print. Exhibition catalog *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, (New York: Guggenheim) 2008.
- Figure 3. Larry Sultan, *Mom Posing for Me*, 1984. Chromogenic print, 73 x 99 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
- Figure 4. Henry Wessel, *Southern California*, 1985. Gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
- Figure 5. Catherine Opie, *Girl Billboard*, 1986. Chromogenic print, 11 x 11 inches. Exhibition catalog *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, (New York: Guggenheim) 2008.
- Figure 6. Catherine Opie, *Plan 73*, 1986. Chromogenic print, 14 x 11 inches. Exhibition catalog *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, (New York: Guggenheim) 2008.
- Figure 7. Catherine Opie, *Dickason Family*, 1987. Chromogenic print, 20 x 20 inches. Exhibition catalog *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, (New York: Guggenheim) 2008.
- Figure 8. Catherine Opie, *Bo*, 1994. Chromogenic print, 60 x 30 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 9. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Sir Thomas More*, 1527. Oil on oak panel, 29 1/2 x 23 3/4 inches. The Frick Collection, New York.

Figure 10. Catherine Opie, *Chloe*, 1993. Chromogenic print, 20 x 16 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 11. Catherine Opie, *Justin Bond*, 1993. Chromogenic print, 20 x 16 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 12. Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993. Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 13. Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994. Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 14. Catherine Opie, *House #7 (Beverly Hills)*, 1995. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 15. Catherine Opie, *Miggi & Ilene, Los Angeles, California*, 1995. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 16. Catherine Opie, *Joanne, Betsy & Olivia, Bayside, New York*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 17. Catherine Opie, *Catherine, Melanie and Sadie Rain*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 18. Catherine Opie, *Mary Ellen, Ann, Gunner, Zoe, & Nora, NYC, New York*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 19. Catherine Opie, *Melissa & Lake, Durham, North Carolina*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

- Figure 20. Catherine Opie, *Deb & Pattie, New York, New York*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 21. Catherine Opie, *Norma & Eyenga, Minneapolis, Minnesota*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 22. Catherine Opie, *Eleanor & Megan, Minneapolis, Minnesota*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 23. Catherine Opie, *Kristopher & Clara, Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 24. Catherine Opie, *Tammy Rae & Kaia, Durham, North Carolina*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 25. Catherine Opie, *Michelle & Melissa, Los Angeles, California*, 1995. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 26. Catherine Opie, *Flipper, Tanya, Chloe & Harriet, San Francisco, California*, 1995. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 27. Catherine Opie, *Emily, Sts, & Becky, Durham, North Carolina*, 1998. Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 28. Tina Barney, *Sunday New York Times*, 1982. Chromogenic print, 47 ½ x 60 7/8 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Figure 29. Catherine Opie, *Untitled #1*, 1999. Chromogenic print, 15 x 19 ½ inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.
- Figure 30. Catherine Opie, *Untitled #11 (Surfers)*, 2003. Chromogenic print, 60 x 40 inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 31. Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004. Chromogenic print, 40 x 32 inches.

Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 32. Catherine Opie, *Sunday Morning Breakfast*, 2004. Chromogenic print, 20 x 16

inches. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Figure 33. Catherine Opie, *Oliver in a Tutu*, 2004. Chromogenic print, 24 x 20 inches. Regen

Projects, Los Angeles.

## Abstract

### CATHERINE OPIE'S DOMESTIC SERIES

By Sara Greene Harney, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013.

Major Director: Dr. Michael Schreffler, Associate Professor & Department Chair, Art History

American photographer Catherine Opie combines portraiture and documentary photography in her photographic series titled *Domestic*. At the center of this series lies the idea of community and the question of how community is constructed, a theme which unites Opie's seemingly disparate bodies of work. *Domestic* depicts lesbians from across the United States in scenes of domesticity, living as couples, families, and housemates. Using formal portrait conventions to aestheticize the images, Opie photographed her subjects in and around their actual homes to create images that are documentary in essence. The series works to represent the lesbian community, which Opie felt had been underrepresented in American fine art photography, as well as present an alternative to the heteronormative view of domestic life in America.

## Introduction

Catherine Opie (1961 - ) is a leading contemporary American photographer based in Los Angeles who is known for both her portraiture and documentary photography. These two genres, which are often considered separately in fine art photography, collide in Opie's series *Domestic*, created between 1995 and 1998.<sup>1</sup> That series is the subject of this thesis. In it, Opie photographed women living in domestic relationships as couples, families, and housemates, both in and around their homes. At the nexus of the two genres that define the series is the idea of community, a constant theme that unites Opie's body of work. Opie created *Domestic* in order to give representation to the lesbian community as well as present an alternative to the heteronormative view of domestic life in America. The portraits that comprise the series are formal in their style, as each portrait is carefully staged with each subject posed by Opie, and yet they are documentary in essence for the domestic scenes that they depict.<sup>2</sup>

Although exhibited several times in 1999 and 2000, the series was primarily shown in gallery spaces without a published catalogue.<sup>3</sup> The first major exhibition of *Domestic* was in 2008 with *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, a mid-career retrospective at the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Domestic* consists of thirteen portraits and seven still-lives, which are all chromogenic prints and were shot with an 8-x-10-inch view camera. For this thesis, only the portraits will be considered.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on documentary photography, please see Martha Rosler's "In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography), in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 303 – 340.

<sup>3</sup> The first exhibition of *Domestic* was at Regen Projects in Los Angeles from April 17 to May 22, 1999 and only included eight prints due to space constraints.

Guggenheim Museum in New York curated by Jennifer Blessing.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was the first comprehensive look at Opie's oeuvre and it was also the first time that images from *Domestic* were presented together as a series rather than individual images in an exhibition catalogue. At the time of the 2008 retrospective, *Domestic*, completed in 1998, was perfectly positioned at the center of Opie's oeuvre, with the beginning of her career starting with her MFA thesis, which she completed in 1988. For this thesis, I will examine the work that Opie completed in the ten years leading up to the completion of *Domestic* in 1998 to show how her prior work informed the series. Then I will examine the series in-depth and discuss the external forces that motivated Opie to create the series. Next I will look at the work created after *Domestic* in the ten years leading up to the mid-career retrospective in 2008 to show the effect that the series had on the later work that she produced. This reexamination will show that *Domestic* is not only an important series in and of itself, but it is also a pivotal work in Opie's oeuvre as well.

Outside of Opie's oeuvre, the *Domestic* series is significant because it provides an alternative to the heteronormative view of domestic life in American fine art photography. For the purpose of this thesis, the term "domestic" will refer to home life and the affairs of the household. This concept of heteronormativity, a term coined by Michael Warner in his 1991 work on social theory, presumes that heterosexuality is a cultural norm and marginalizes anyone who does not belong to this norm.<sup>5</sup> Heteronormativity is rooted in feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin's notion of a "sex-gender" system<sup>6</sup> and feminist writer Adrienne Rich's notion of

---

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Blessing, "Cathy's World," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, ed. Jennifer Blessing, Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 3-17.

<sup>6</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward and Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>7</sup> The domination of heteronormative images of domesticity in American fine art photography in the 1980s and 90s is evident with the 1991 exhibition *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* at New York's Museum of Modern Art curated by Peter Galassi.<sup>8</sup> According to the press release, this exhibition sought to present "a varied and challenging cross-section of contemporary work, all of it devoted to life at home" and to survey the development of domesticity as an important theme in American photography.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that domesticity in America was the primary focus of the show, the exhibition did not include any images that could be viewed as overtly gay or lesbian. This absence from the exhibition is evidence that heteronormativity existed at that time in American fine art photography.

An in-depth examination of *Domestic* such as this has not been done before. For the most part, the scholarship that exists on the series only consists of reviews in magazines and newspapers. The series was first reviewed for its debut exhibition at the Los Angeles gallery Regen Projects in April 1999. Critic Vince Aletti and author Deborah Picker provide a general overview of the show and of Opie's work. Each review identifies community as the thematic thread that runs through and unites Opie's work. Picker's review offers details about the exhibition including the number of portraits on view (just eight) and connects the series to an earlier self-portrait that Opie created.<sup>10</sup> Aletti's review contributes the idea that the *Domestic*

---

<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631-60.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Galassi, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Museum of Modern Art, "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort" press release, September 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Picker, "Tall Tales," *LA Weekly*, May 14, 1999, 35.

series is not about normalization or basing lesbian domestic imagery on a heterosexual model.<sup>11</sup> The series was reviewed again while on view at the New York gallery Gorney, Bravin + Lee in April 2000. Aletti provides another review of the series and makes the first reference to the 1991 exhibition *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* as an impetus for Opie to create *Domestic*.<sup>12</sup> Edward Leffingwell also reviewed the series for *Art in America* and contributed a reading of three portraits, including one portrait that is not referenced in any of the other scholarship.<sup>13</sup> *Domestic* was also on view with the series *Houses* at ArtPace in San Antonio in April 2000. Writer Margaret Hawkins provides a review of the show in which she discusses Opie's longing for domesticity as well as community through the series.<sup>14</sup> *Domestic* was also part of a traveling exhibition of Opie's work at the Photographer's Gallery London in August 2000 and then the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in December of the same year.<sup>15</sup> While a catalogue did accompany this exhibition, it only included a few individual portraits from the series.

The first chapter will provide a brief background on Opie and her formal education in photography. It will discuss her early photographic influences as well as her professional influences while studying photography as an undergraduate and graduate student. It will then discuss the works that she created from 1988 to 1998, the ten years preceding the *Domestic* series. This period will establish Opie as both a portrait and documentary photographer

---

<sup>11</sup> Vince Aletti, "Lesbian Domesticities," *Out*, April 1999, 32-3.

<sup>12</sup> Vince Aletti, "American Women," *Village Voice*, April 18, 2000: 69.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Leffingwell, "Catherine Opie at Gorney Bravin + Lee," *Art in America*, July 2000: 105.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Hawkins, "Searching for identity; Photographer looks to outsiders," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 1, 2000: 50.

<sup>15</sup> Bush, Kate, *Catherine Opie*, (London: The Photographer's Gallery, 2000).

interested in the idea of community. The next chapter will examine *Domestic*, providing a discussion of each portrait in the series as well as Opie's motivations to create the series. The portraits in *Domestic* will be divided into three categories in order to organize the discussion. Chapter three will then discuss the works created from 1999 to 2008, the ten year period after *Domestic* was created and leading up to Opie's mid-career retrospective at the Guggenheim. This period will show how *Domestic* informed Opie's later works. Finally, chapter four will provide a background on lesbian representation and demonstrate how Opie challenges heteronormative assumptions of domesticity in American fine art photography through the portraits in the *Domestic* series.

## Chapter One: Before *Domestic*

This chapter begins with Opie's background including her early influences and education. This is necessary to establish Opie as a documentary and portrait photographer and to show how community lies at the center of Opie's oeuvre. In this thesis, community refers to not only a group of people that live together in a particular place but also a group of people that share common values or interests. Opie's interest in photography began at an early age when she was inspired by a photograph in her school text book of a young girl working in a mill by the famed documentary photographer Lewis Hine: "I came across a photograph by Lewis Hine in my social studies book that showed a little girl in North Carolina working in a cotton mill, dated 1908-09. I wrote the report all from the importance of the photograph and what I learned from it, as opposed to what I learned from the reading."<sup>16</sup>

Hine was an American sociologist turned documentary photographer who traveled around the country photographing young children working in factories in the early 1900s. Typical of his images are photographs such as *Cotton-Mill Worker, North Carolina, 1908* (Figure 1). It is not certain that this was the exact image in Opie's social studies book. What is certain, however, is that the image had a profound effect on Opie: "That photograph changed my life. It really did. From that point on, I knew what I wanted to do. I declared to my parents that

---

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Maura Reilly, "The Drive to Describe," *Art Journal* (Summer 2001): 87.

night at dinner that I wanted to take photographs.”<sup>17</sup> Opie asked her parents for a camera and soon began taking photographs of her own community in her neighborhood. “I had a little Instamatic my parents gave me,” Opie has said, “and I became obsessed with photographing the neighborhood. People. Portraits. Stop signs, whatever.”<sup>18</sup> The very first two photographs that she took were individual portraits of her father and mother in the kitchen, *Dad and Mom*, 1970 (Figure 2). These portraits are remarkably close in style to the later portraits Opie would create and perhaps reveal her earliest desire to document her community. The portraits allude to *Domestic* for Opie’s early combination of portraiture and documentary photography. Opie also photographed her neighborhood in Sandusky, Ohio, self-portraits, her friends, her brother, landscapes, and photographs of street signs. In addition to Hine, other early influences were documentary photographers Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Bernice Abbott, Margaret Bourke-White, and Helen Levitt. Opie describes her motivation to document her community as “this intense desire to catalogue and archive the people and places around me.”<sup>19</sup>

Opie went on to pursue an education in photography and studied as an undergraduate at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). At SFAI, Opie received a traditional education in black-and-white photography, studying under documentary photographers Larry Sultan and Henry Wessel. Opie credits Sultan and Wessel as her two main supports while at SFAI, saying “I think they must have seen something in me because they put a lot of energy into me.”<sup>20</sup> While Opie was at SFAI, Sultan was working on a series titled *Pictures from Home* (1982 – 1991) which comprised photographs of his parents in their home, such as *Mom Posing for Me*, 1984 (Figure

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Deborah Picker, “Tall Tales,” *LA Weekly*, May 14, 1999, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Maura Reilly, “The Drive to Describe,” *Art Journal* (Summer 2001): 89.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 88.

3). This image depicts Sultan's mother and father in their home. His mother stands on the right against a wall, which serves as the background, and poses for the photograph. Sultan's father sits in a chair on the left with his back to the viewer and watches a baseball game. Sultan's images show a clear relationship to the direction Opie would take her work, creating portraits of families at home that are documentary in essence. Wessel, on the other hand, is well-known as a street photographer on the west coast. The genre of street photography describes candid photographs of subjects in public places as a way of observing and capturing social interaction. Wessel created black and white photographs of the landscape and people of the American West, such as *Southern California*, 1985 (Figure 4). This image depicts a shirtless male beach-goer standing in front of a building under the high-noon sun. He wears sunglasses and looks directly at the viewer just as the photograph is taken. Behind him a sign reads "Ocean Sands" and a short wall in the foreground separates the subject from the viewer, as if to put him on display and document the scene. Wessel's street photography style no doubt influenced Opie's photography and her desire to document her community. Opie studied under Sultan and Wessel until she graduated from SFAI in 1985.

#### *Master Plan*

Opie went on to continue her formal education in photography at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California (CalArts), enrolling in the MFA program. While at CalArts, Opie received a firm grounding in the history of photography and critical theory from her professors, including artists Allan Sekula and Catherine Lord. She entered the program as a strictly black-and-white street photographer, but Sekula and Lord pushed her to think more conceptually about her practice. The culmination of her work at CalArts was her thesis *Master Plan* (1986 – 1988), a body of work about suburban planned communities, which consisted of a

series of two hundred photographs taken over a two-year period.<sup>21</sup> The project dealt with Valencia in particular and the idea of Southern California's planned communities as being under the influence of the master plan—a place where people can live, work, and play. Opie describes her own experience coming to study at CalArts without a car and, being a street photographer, wandering out of her dorm and stumbling into the planned communities in Valencia that surrounded the school. Opie quickly realized that this kind of suburban growth and vast planned communities around CalArts needed to be talked about. This provided the inspiration for Opie to create *Master Plan*.<sup>22</sup>

*Master Plan* was organized into two exhibitions, one for each year Opie spent at CalArts. The first part of the series concentrated on the changing landscapes and the second part focused on the houses that were being built within those landscapes. *Girl Billboard*, 1986 (Figure 5) depicts a young girl with blond hair and dressed in a pink shirt, smiling as the sign proclaims “I come home to Valencia.” For Opie, the advertising and the model homes represented the kind of family that lived in the planned communities in Valencia—a family with a father and mother and children that followed traditional gender roles. Rooms were painted pink and decorated with a cheerleading theme for girls and wallpapered in a baseball theme for boys, reinforcing strict gender differentiation. Opie also photographed the exterior of the homes from the curb, as with *Plan 73*, 1986 (Figure 6), which depicts a home for sale with a description of the house and sales price below the image.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Master Plan* was shot using a 4-x-5-inch camera, a 2 ¼-inch camera, and a 6-x-4.5-centimeter camera. In the manifestation presented by Opie at the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, in 2006, the project comprised fifty-four chromogenic prints.

<sup>22</sup> Maura Reilly, “The Drive to Describe,” *Art Journal* (Summer 2001): 89.

For her final installation of *Master Plan*, Opie interviewed two families that lived in these planned communities, created their family portrait, and photographed the interiors of their homes. Family is a term directly linked to domesticity and community through the home as a place where a group of people live. Family can encompass the traditional sense of a group of people related to each other biologically as well as a group of people who are not related biologically but chose to live together and call themselves family, a chosen family. One of these portraits is *Dickason Family*, 1987 (Figure 7). Taken in the Dickason's living room, the portrait depicts the mother and son seated together in a chair as the father stands beside them, his right hand placed on his wife's shoulder. By posing the family in this way, with the husband standing and his wife and son both seated, this type of portrait reinforces the idea of a patriarchal family and heteronormativity. The two family portraits that Opie created for *Master Plan* foreshadow the portraits that she would later create for *Domestic*. Despite the fact that Opie lived in a similar type of community near San Diego during high school, she has said that she felt like an outsider looking in at the community in Valencia. Curator Jennifer Blessing believes that "while *Master Plan* critiques the enforcement of gender stereotypes and economic exclusions in middle-class American society, it is also a statement of her conscious refusal to define herself within the paternalistic model of her own family."<sup>23</sup> By documenting a community to which she feels that she does not belong, Opie is also searching for a community to which she does belong and her own domesticity. In the end, *Master Plan* allowed Opie to consider photography in a conceptual way. In her own words, "when I went to grad school at CalArts and worked on the *Master Plan*

---

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Blessing, "Cathy's World," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, ed. Jennifer Blessing, Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008), 25.

for two years, that experience started off this discourse that I've had with the medium of photography and my ideas around it."<sup>24</sup>

### Portraits

After graduating from CalArts, Opie moved to Los Angeles in 1989 to begin working as an artist and supported herself as a lab technician at the University of California, Irvine. Opie turned her interest towards portraiture and began to photograph her friends to create an ongoing series simply titled *Portraits* (1993 – 1996).<sup>25</sup> *Portraits* was the series that first brought Opie to the attention of the art world and awarded her inclusion into the 1995 biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.<sup>26</sup> For *Portraits*, Opie moved beyond her street photography to create over fifty studio portraits for the series. Shot against vividly colored backgrounds, Opie presents her community of friends in formal full and three-quarter length portraits, both seated and standing. In regard to the series, Opie said, "I take a very traditional way of looking at portraiture to photograph a nontraditional and misrepresented community in a loving and dignified way."<sup>27</sup> These portraits are significant for their form and style which creates a dichotomy with the striking appearance of each sitter: drag queens and kings, performance artists, and female-to-male transsexuals that she met in the leather sado/masochistic subculture in San Francisco. Opie chose to photograph her community because she felt that it was being underrepresented. "It's about the fact that my friends and my community have as much right to be visible and not put down," Opie has said. "That's why I bring a dignity to the

---

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Maura Reilly, "The Drive to Describe," *Art Journal* (Summer 2001): 89.

<sup>25</sup> The series *Portraits* comprises over fifty chromogenic prints and was shot with a 4-x-5-inch view camera.

<sup>26</sup> Klaus Kertess and John Ashbery, *1995 Biennial Exhibition*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995), 163.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Opie, quoted in Colette Dartnall, "Interview with Catherine Opie, July 11, 1997," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Stephanie Emerson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), unpaginated.

portraits.”<sup>28</sup> The work chosen from *Portraits* for the biennial was a self-portrait titled *Bo*, 1994 (Figure 8). For the full-length portrait, Opie poses as her drag king persona Bo and is dressed in a flannel shirt, jeans and black boots. Her hair is cut short and she wears a fake mustache with piercings in her chin and earlobes. A leather whip casually hangs from her belt. Opie suggests that the portrait of Bo differs from a true self-portrait: “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. 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.”<sup>29</sup> By including herself as Bo in this series, Opie demonstrates to the viewer that she identifies with the community that she is documenting and brings credibility to her work. In regard to this series, Opie has said “The point of the portrait series, in some ways, is not normalizing the image for the straight community; it’s about documenting the community itself for the community.”<sup>30</sup>

With *Portraits*, Opie established herself as a serious portrait photographer. For the series, Opie drew on traditional portraiture techniques, widely used in the medium of oil painting, to create a different way of looking at her subject. Opie referenced the portraits of sixteenth-century German painter Hans Holbein the Younger (1497 – 1543), court painter to King Henry VIII of England. Opie received a book of Holbein’s paintings while she was studying at CalArts and has cited Holbein as an influence in her portraiture, specifically Holbein’s use of color and

---

<sup>28</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Michael Wang, “Catherine Opie,” *The Harvard Photography Journal* 8 (2001), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Kristine McKenna, “Welcome to Opie’s World,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1994, Calender section, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Michael Wang, “Catherine Opie,” *The Harvard Photography Journal* 8 (2001), 5.

the intense gaze of the sitters for her portraits.<sup>31</sup> Holbein worked in the Northern Renaissance style, which is known for heightened realism and extreme detail rendered via the medium of oil painting. To this style Holbein applied traditional conventions of portraiture to create portraits that are distinguished for their rich color as well as their objectivity and detachment—Holbein does not identify with his sitters, nor does he hide their flaws. Holbein’s portrait of Sir Thomas More (Figure 9) is an excellent example of the portrait tradition from which Opie borrowed to create her series. For *Sir Thomas More*, Holbein creates a three-quarter length portrait set against a deep green fabric background. Sir Thomas is dressed in his regalia and gazes intently out of frame. The entire portrait is rendered with a keen attention to detail.

Opie’s application of Holbein’s style is evident in a comparison between Holbein’s *Sir Thomas More* and Opie’s *Chloe*, 1993 (Figure 10). For *Chloe*, Opie positions her subject for a three-quarter length portrait against a vibrant green background. Chloe leans forward and similarly gazes beyond the edge of the frame in a deadpan stare. By applying Holbein’s formal portrait techniques to her work, Opie created a series of portraits that invite the viewer to consider a work at which they would otherwise not look. As art critic David Pagel writes in his review of *Portraits*: “Her bold art doesn’t simply instruct us to relinquish our stereotypical behavior, but instead invites us, individually, to scrutinize our own cognitive processes, to see just how decisively our preconceptions about what we’re looking at shape what we see.”<sup>32</sup>

Another portrait from the series is *Justin Bond*, 1993 (Figure 11), a three-quarter length portrait of drag queen Justin Bond shot against a deep purple background. In the portrait, Justin wears a fitted corset over a polka dot dress. He also wears makeup, including lipstick and mascara, and

---

<sup>31</sup> Maura Reilly, “The Drive to Describe,” *Art Journal* (Summer 2001): 90.

<sup>32</sup> David Pagel, “Catherine Opie,” *Art Issues* (September-October 1994): 45.

his hair is carefully groomed. Justin stares directly at the viewer, commanding their attention, while at the same time maintaining calm sense of composure. By presenting Justin in this way, Opie creates a portrait that challenges the viewer's preconceptions about her subject. This allows the viewer to contemplate the subject and consider it as a work of fine art photography. In a 1994 review of the series, art critic Jerry Saltz writes "Opie's work would be only sensational if it relied exclusively on its subject, but her technique is silky and professional, her format historical and defined. She's a subversive artist, but she's more than that too. She's one of the better young American photographers working today."<sup>33</sup>

### Self-Portraits

During the time that she was creating *Portraits*, Opie also created two self-portraits that reveal her desire for the kind of domesticity that she had been portraying in her earlier photographs. The self-portraits are not part of a formal series, but they appear in Opie's oeuvre as single photographs created at important junctures in her career. "I thought it was important," Opie said, "if I was going to document my community, to document myself within that community."<sup>34</sup> The first, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993 (Figure 12), depicts Opie's bare back and borrows from the tradition of the female nude seen from behind. Carved into the flesh of her back is a child-like drawing of two women that is still weeping blood. The women hold hands in front of a house and are denoted by stick-figures wearing skirts. With her back to the viewer, she conceals her face while, at the same time, revealing one of her deepest desires, a family. The drawing on her back visualizes her thoughts, which is clearly a longing for her own domesticity. Opie, who had recently gotten out of a relationship, was longing at the time to start a family, and

---

<sup>33</sup> Jerry Saltz, "L.A. Rising," *Art & Auction*, April 1994, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Russell Ferguson, "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part One: February 1996," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 46.

the image radiates all of the pain that she was feeling as a result of her failed relationship. Opie said, "I've always wanted to make a home and live with a lover, and I haven't yet been able to achieve that in my life."<sup>35</sup> This was her first true self-portrait, a photograph she identified as being a picture of herself as Cathy, unlike previous portraits of her drag king persona Bo, one of which was included in *Portraits*.

In the second self-portrait, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994 (Figure 13), Opie sits facing the camera nude from the waist up with the word "pervert" carved into her chest in ornate letters. In contrast to the drawing in *Cutting*, the word "pervert" displays more control and precision. She wears a tight black leather hood over her head and twenty-three evenly spaced needles neatly pierce each arm. The background is a rich fabric of scrolling leaves in black and sparkling gold, which echoes the metallic sheen of the needles and the buckles and rings of the leather mask, as well as the nipple piercing, belt buckle, and studs. Again, Opie conceals her face and yet reveals all on her chest—the way she feels that she is viewed by those outside her community. The connotation of the word "pervert" is usually negative, however Opie wears it proudly as a badge of honor: "Well I am a big old pervert. I like things that supposedly aren't within the norm. I have developed deviant sexual habits. So I like that the word is so elegantly scripted into my chest."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps her most confrontational work, this photograph addresses a desire for visibility and recognition, and it was Opie's declaration of her affiliation with the sado/masochistic subculture in San Francisco. Opie perceived this community as alienated from gay and lesbian political organizations that were seeking mainstream acceptance. As with *Master Plan*, this self-portrait reveals that Opie views herself as an outsider, even within her own gay and lesbian

---

<sup>35</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Deborah Picker, "Tall Tales," *LA Weekly*, May 14, 1999, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Russell Ferguson, "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part One: February 1996," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 46.

community. This self-portrait is not as overt as *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, (Figure 12), in showing Opie's desire for domesticity. Both self-portraits, however, grapple with the idea of how family is constructed and the way in which Opie chooses to live does not dictate whether or not she should be able to have a family of her own.

### Houses

This interest in community and desire for domesticity is also evident in her series *Houses* (1995 – 1996), which documents houses in Beverly Hills and Bel Air.<sup>37</sup> Opie turned back to street photography for the series, which can be viewed as a continuation of *Master Plan* and grew out of Opie's own "desire for a domestic ideal which seems so unobtainable, not because of how I choose to live my life, but because of how the American Dream has been constructed."<sup>38</sup> An example of a typical work in this series is *House #7 (Beverly Hills)*, 1995 (Figure 14), which depicts a gated home exterior as viewed from the street. Photographing with an 8 x 10 camera for the first time, Opie summoned intricate detail in these deadpan, frontal views, taken from a low vantage point. The decorative gate, with its lines and geometric patterns, creates a barrier at the door between the inside of the home and the outside. The edge of the street, curb, and sidewalk are visible in the foreground of the photograph and are present to only further separate the interior from the exterior. Instead of photographing the largest, most expensive homes, Opie focused on less attractive houses, shooting them from the curb, like a real estate agent screening properties for prospective buyers. Absent from the photographs are the occupants of the expensive residences that Opie photographed. The series *Houses*, with no human presence, is in direct contrast to the series *Portraits*, where there is only the sitter or sitters. This absence is

---

<sup>37</sup> The series *Houses* comprises twelve chromogenic prints and was shot with an 8-x-10-inch view camera.

<sup>38</sup> Catherine Opie, quoted in Colette Dartnall, "Interview with Catherine Opie, July 11, 1997," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Stephanie Emerson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), unpaginated.

intentional, as Opie is interested in the way that the identities of people in a community are embedded in the structures that she photographs. The house is essential to domesticity as a home and can help to describe a type of community, such as a planned community like Valencia. By photographing these house facades, Opie was considering what it would be like to live in the neighborhoods and homes that she was documenting and her own domesticity.

In the ten year span leading up to *Domestic*, Opie created landscapes and portraits that focused on the idea of community. Opie's interest in community was clear from her earliest photographs taken as a child and her graduate thesis series *Master Plan*. She documented separately the people that comprise a particular community as well as the communities that the people inhabit. For her portraits, Opie drew upon the portrait conventions of paintings in order to draw the viewer in and prompt them to consider a work at which they would normally not look. By creating the *Portraits* and *Houses* series, Opie had laid the groundwork for *Domestic*.

## Chapter Two: *Domestic*

This chapter is devoted to the *Domestic* series and will include a discussion of its creation as well as the individual portraits in the series. In 1995, the same year that she was selected for inclusion in the Whitney biennial and began the *Houses* series, Opie turned back to portraits and started a new project: *Domestic*. As was the case with the *Portraits* series, Opie once again used her community of friends as her subject to create the first three portraits for the series. After creating those initial images, however, Opie decided to take a break from the series, explaining “I had been working on the *Domestic* series since 1995, but I didn’t feel that it was very successful. I didn’t know what I was doing with it. I was relating to it too personally.”<sup>39</sup>

Opie resumed the series in 1998 when she decided to broaden it to include more than just the communities that she was a part of in San Francisco and Los Angeles: “I wanted it to be larger in terms of the politics of lesbian communities all across the United States.”<sup>40</sup> The series was finished over a nearly three month road trip across the United States in 1998. Traveling in a motor home, Opie set out on this cross-country trip to photograph friends and strangers that she met along the way and visited nine cities including Minneapolis, New York, San Francisco, and Durham. Many things about this photographic road trip recall the work of other photographers that made similar journeys, especially the work of Robert Frank, a Swiss-born American

---

<sup>39</sup> Russell Ferguson, "How I Think": An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part Two: May 2000," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 48.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

photographer. Frank is known for *The Americans*, a book of photographs taken in 1955 on a road trip across the country.<sup>41</sup> Traveling across the country to photograph the American landscape and its people is a hallmark of documentary photography, and it is for this reason that Opie has been compared to Robert Frank.<sup>42</sup> What resulted from Opie's road trip was a series of portraits depicting women living in domestic relationships. These portraits can be separated into three kinds: families, couples, and groups. The family portraits depict a lesbian couple with a child or children, while the couple portraits depict just two women by themselves. The group portraits are different because they depict three or more women living together with no clear family ties. I will now discuss these different kinds of portraits that Opie created beginning with families.

### Families

*Miggi & Ilene, Los Angeles, California, 1995* (Figure 15), depicts two women in a typical Southern California backyard pool and was the first family portrait that Opie created. One of the two women is clearly pregnant and floats on her back with her eyes closed and arms outstretched to stay buoyant. The other woman supports her partner from behind but her eyes, however, are open and fixed on the viewer. Her supportive position behind her partner and intense gaze come across as protective. Both women are nude and their pink flesh contrasts with the deep blue of the water. The large pool is surrounded by a wall that runs through the midground and provides privacy for the couple in their backyard. Just beyond the wall are tree tops which reveal that the pool is situated at a high elevation, and in the background is a scenic mountain view and a clear

---

<sup>41</sup> *The Americans* was first published in France as *Les Américains* by Robert Delpire, Ed., to accompany an exhibition.

<sup>42</sup> Ralf Christofori, "Catherine Opie," in *Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, ed. Max Hollein and Martina Weinhart, (Frankfurt: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 198.

blue sky. The pool in the backyard and the beautiful landscape that surrounds it suggest that the couple is well-off and live quite comfortably. The overall effect of this image makes the viewer feel relaxed and gives them a sense of tranquility in the same way that the couple in the image appears relaxed and tranquil in their pool as they near the birth of their child. One of the first photos created in 1995, this image is also reflective of Opie's desire and longing for her own family and domesticity, something that Miggi and Ilene have in the image and she did not.

One of the most widely-published images created on this trip is another family portrait, *Joanne, Betsy, & Olivia, Bayside, New York, 1998* (Figure 16). This photograph depicts a couple, Joanne and Betsy, lounging in their dining room after breakfast with their young adopted daughter, Olivia. The child appears to be Asian while her two mothers clearly are not, which encourages the viewer to contemplate just how this family was created. One woman sits in an armchair pushed back from the dining table while her partner sits behind the table, her attention turned toward Olivia who holds a toy horse with one arm. In the background there is a large bay window that looks out onto a picturesque neighborhood street. A doll house sits in the window and more toys are strewn across the floor at their feet. With this image, the viewer gets the feeling that Olivia has become the center of Joanne and Betsy's world by the way that she commands both of the women's attention. Opie captures this sentiment by placing Olivia between her mothers and directly in the center of the composition. This composition draws the viewer's gaze to the center to focus on Olivia. While it appears that this image captures a decisive moment, Opie has in fact staged the scene to create this effect. Staging the scene serves a practical purpose, as shooting with a large-format camera requires a certain amount of preparation, but also an aesthetic purpose as well. As Opie has said, "I didn't want to get into a mushy 'We're all happy lesbian couples' kind of representation and I think I was successful in

staying away from that. What I was trying to do was make photographs in which there was a merger of the real and the staged."<sup>43</sup> By this statement, Opie references how she combines documentary and portraiture to create the *Domestic* series. Having created portraits in studios and documented neighborhoods and communities, Opie now brings the two subjects together to create *Domestic*.

The last two family portraits are *Catherine, Melanie, & Sadie Rain, New York, New York*, 1998 (Figure 17), and *Mary Ellen, Ann, Gunner, Zoe, & Nora, New York, New York*, 1998 (Figure 18). In *Catherine, Melanie, & Sadie Rain*, the family is photographed in front of a window overlooking the city. They are positioned in the foreground allowing for a close-up image in which all three figures fill nearly half the frame. Melanie stands in front of Catherine, who sits, and they appear to embrace as they both look down upon Sadie-Rain who sits next to them on the windowsill. In *Mary Ellen, Ann, Gunner, Zoe, & Nora*, the family is similarly photographed in front of a window that overlooks the city in their living room. They, however, are positioned in the background, filling less space in the frame and appearing unaware of the viewer's presence as they play with their children on the sofa. In both images, it is not clear if the children are biological or adoptive, however it is clear that the children are the focus of these photographs. In both instances, the viewer's gaze is drawn toward the child or children through their parents own gaze and attention. By positioning her subjects in this way, Opie is able to aestheticize images that depict lesbian domesticity and make them both interesting to look at and resist normalization at the same time. The portraits also remain documentary by depicting real families in their actual homes.

---

<sup>43</sup> Russell Ferguson, "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part Two: May 2000," in Catherine Opie, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 48.

## Couples

The next kind of portraits that Opie created is portraits of couples inside and outside of their homes. These comprise over one-half of the portraits in the series at seven in total. First I will discuss and compare the indoor portraits and then I will discuss the outdoor portraits. In *Melissa & Lake, Durham, North Carolina, 1998* (Figure 19), and *Deb & Pattie, New York, New York, 1998* (Figure 20), both couples are photographed in their bedrooms. In *Melissa & Lake*, both women face each other as they stand in the foreground and turn their heads to look out at the viewer. They each place one hand on each other, a modest gesture, which is their only physical connection. It is as if the viewer happened upon the couple just before they were to embrace, interrupting the scene. In *Deb & Pattie*, one woman lounges on the bed, a dog curled up by her side, as she looks out at the viewer. Her partner stands behind with both hands on her hips, looking down upon the bed. A small lamp in the background emits a soft glow that illuminates the walls of the bedroom, revealing the erotic art that alludes to the fact that Deb and Pattie are lesbians. The bedroom is a private space and, in these images, Opie invites the viewer inside. Opie affirms that these are lesbian scenes of domesticity by choosing to photograph her subjects in the bedroom. Through this context, the viewer is able to perceive the scene as such and, therefore, correctly read the image as a lesbian representation.

The two other indoor portraits of couples are *Norma & Eyenga, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998* (Figure 21), and *Eleanor & Megan, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998* (Figure 22). In *Norma & Eyenga*, Opie depicts the couple in an embrace as they sit on their living room sofa. They are photographed from the waist up with the sofa filling the foreground and creating a barrier to the background which reveals what appears to be an open doorway to the outside. Neither Norma nor Eyenga seems to look at directly the viewer, as they both avert their gaze and look in

different directions. For *Eleanor & Megan*, the couple is photographed through an outside window sitting inside their home. Light pours through another window visible in the background which creates a glare on the window in the foreground, obscuring the scene and making the image difficult to read. The couple appears to sit on a sofa up against the window with their backs to the viewer. Eleanor and Megan turn to look at each other and are seen in profile from the shoulders up. For this image, it is the window that acts as a barrier separating the interior from the exterior. In each of these photographs, however, Opie creates a sense of separation between the subject and viewer by placing a barrier between each couple and the outside of their homes. Additionally, none of the women acknowledge the viewer with their gaze, which creates another barrier between the interior of the frame and the exterior space that the viewer occupies. These barriers that Opie creates are similar to the gated barriers that are present in the *Houses* series. This time, however, the viewer sees the scene from the inside looking out, rather than the outside looking in.

The last three portraits taken of couples are photographed outside and consist of *Kristopher & Clara, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1998* (Figure 23), *Tammy Rae & Kaia, Durham, North Carolina, 1998* (Figure 24), and *Michelle & Melissa, Los Angeles, California, 1995* (Figure 25). In *Kristopher & Clara*, (Figure 23), the couple is photographed sitting in rocking chairs as they hold hands under the shade of a tree in their backyard. They both look at the viewer with slight smiles, ready to have their portrait made. Clara has long blond hair and wears a dress with a cardigan while Kristopher has short hair and is dressed in a button-up shirt and jeans. This photograph evokes the *Portraits* series, albeit the subjects have been removed from the studio and are photographed in the backyard of their home. The way that Opie has posed the couple, sitting together side by side, recalls *Portraits* for her formal arrangement of the sitters.

In *Tammy Rae & Kaia*, (Figure 24), the couple also appears outside in their yard. Tammy Rae stands on the right in the foreground wearing a hat and sundress as she holds a glass of lemonade. Kaia stands on the left in the midground, slightly out of focus, with her back to the viewer. She is wearing a t-shirt with shorts and pushes a lawn mower as she looks over her shoulder towards Tammy Rae. Two chairs are visible behind Tammy Rae, similar to the two chairs that Kristopher and Clara sit on in Figure 23. In the image, the viewer gets the feeling that this couple is just going about their regular day doing yard work which relates to their home and to their domesticity. As mundane and commonplace as this activity seems, it is a part of what Opie is searching for her own domesticity as well.

In the final outdoor portrait, *Michelle & Melissa*, (Figure 25), two women are photographed among a crowd at an outdoor yard sale, and it is unclear whether or not they are buying or selling. This photograph is the most casual of the three with the subjects completely unaware of the viewer's presence, and with perhaps the viewer unaware of exactly who the subjects are in the cluttered scene. Associate curator Nat Trotman included this portrait in the *Domestic* series in the exhibition catalog for *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, however the photograph does not quite follow the compositions of the other photographs. In fact, Regen Projects, Opie's west coast gallery, does not include *Michelle & Melissa* in its online presentation of the portraits from *Domestic*.<sup>44</sup> It can be argued that perhaps this image was the reason Opie felt the series unsuccessful in 1995 and did not resume the series until 1998.

### Groups

The last kind of portraits Opie made for *Domestic* are two group portraits: *Flipper, Tanya, Chloe & Harriet, San Francisco, California*, 1995 (Figure 26), and *Emily, Sts, & Becky*,

---

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Opie, *Domestic*, 1995 – 1998. <<http://www.regenprojects.com/exhibitions/1999-04-catherine-opie/#1>>

*Durham, North Carolina, 1998* (Figure 27). The images present another view of women living together domestically as housemates and in both Opie has staged the women around the kitchen table, what many people view as the heart of the home. In *Flipper, Tanya, Chloe & Harriet*, three of the women casually look out at the viewer while the fourth stares out of the frame as if completely unaware of the viewer at all. In *Emily, Sts, & Becky*, two women sit at the table and one stands, leaning casually against the wall. None of them look towards the viewer, again as if they are unaware of the viewer's presence. The overall effect of the image is no affect at all; the subjects seem indifferent towards the viewer peering into their domestic lives. By photographing these two groups of women in the kitchen, the heart of the home, Opie solidifies the understanding that these women have created their own chosen family, one not created through biological relationships but through their community.

#### Impetus for *Domestic*

Opie's first motivation to create *Domestic* was a personal desire for her own domesticity. This desire is evident in her first self-portrait, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, (Figure 12), the image of Opie with child-like drawing of lesbian couple carved into the flesh of her back. Opie created the image while contemplating domesticity after an unexpected break-up of a long-term relationship. In reference to this failed relationship, Opie says "I finally thought I was going to have a home. I had really desired that, and that's where the cutting on my back of the two stick figure girls came from."<sup>45</sup> In fact, it was this self-portrait, spurred by Opie's desire for a family,

---

<sup>45</sup> Russell Ferguson, "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part One: February 1996," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 45.

which led her to later create *Domestic*: “The *Domestic* series was very much about that cutting, about the fact that I’ve always wanted to be married and have that kind of household.”<sup>46</sup>

The second motivation for Opie to create the series was her reaction to the 1991 exhibition *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA). This exhibition sought to survey the development of scenes of domestic life that American photographers had turned to since 1980. Curator Peter Galassi wrote in the catalogue that the exhibition “allows the inclusion of pictures that amplify our image of domestic experience.”<sup>47</sup> The exhibition included works from such notable photographers as Tina Barney, William Eggleston, Sally Mann, and even Larry Sultan and Henry Wessel, Opie’s undergraduate professors at SAFI.

Despite the inclusion of these and other photographers well-known for photographing domestic scenes, Opie found the exhibition to be lacking images that presented something other than a heteronormative domestic scene. In an interview from 2007, Opie comments that “it was important to create those images [in *Domestic*], because of shows like the one at the Museum of Modern Art organized by Peter Galassi that was all about family, but there was no queer family involved.”<sup>48</sup> Galassi discloses, however, that “inevitably and quite deliberately this survey assigns a level of generality to the pictures it includes that was not, or not necessarily, intended by their makers. But that generality should not be construed as an image of ordinary domestic life in America, for there is no single ordinary life in America any more than every member of

---

<sup>46</sup> Russell Ferguson, “How I Think’: An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part Two: May 2000,” in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers’ Gallery, 2000), 141.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Galassi, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 12.

<sup>48</sup> Russell Ferguson, “I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie, May 2007,” in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, ed. Jennifer Blessing, Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008) 256.

the family of man is the same as all others.<sup>49</sup> Whether or not Galassi was alluding to the heteronormative nature of the exhibition by this statement is unclear. It is quite evident, however, that the opportunity was present to include same-sex couples, families, and gay and lesbian individuals through the diverse group of artists in the exhibition. Nan Goldin photographs, for example, were selected from her book *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986), in which she documented her family and friends, a group that became known as “The Family of Nan.” This was pun and reference to the famous Edward Steichen exhibition *The Family of Man* initially shown at MoMA in 1955 and later around the world. For this project, Goldin was interested in the fluidity of gender roles in her community, and her photographs depict a mix of stereotypically masculine and feminine dress and poses. The images that were selected from this body of work for *Pleasures and Terrors*, however, are less transgressive and do not clearly depict any gay or lesbian subjects.

Opie also felt that by creating *Domestic* she was having a conversation with Tina Barney: “I felt that she had become, in a way, the most prominent photographer of the family. I wanted to introduce a queer element to those representations.”<sup>50</sup> Barney is well known for her large-scale color photographs of her affluent family and friends in their New York City and New England homes. An example of Barney’s work which was included in *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* is *Sunday New York Times*, 1982 (Figure 28). This photograph depicts family gathered around a large dining room table strewn with newspaper. The whole family, ten figures in all, appears immersed in their morning routine and unaware of the viewer’s presence. When comparing this image with Opie’s two group portraits from the *Domestic* series, *Flipper*, *Tanya*,

---

<sup>49</sup> Peter Galassi, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Russell Ferguson, “How I Think’: An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part Two: May 2000,” in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers’ Gallery, 2000), 141.

*Chloe & Harriet* and *Emily, Sts, & Becky* (Figures 26 and 27), Barney's influence on Opie's work becomes clear: all three of these photographs are similarly composed and depict a group gathered together around a dining table. To Opie, Barney's images embodied the heteronormative representation of family that was prevalent in American fine art photography. It is for this reason that she tried to respond to Barney's work when creating the portraits for *Domestic*.

### Chapter Three: After *Domestic*

This chapter will discuss the period of time after Opie completed *Domestic* in 1998 and leading up to the mid-career retrospective in 2008 at the Guggenheim. Discussing the series in the context of the works that were created after *Domestic* has not been done before and will show how the series influenced Opie's later work, primarily in her choice of subject matter as well as her continuing examination of community. Studying this period of time will also demonstrate how Opie reconciled her desire for domesticity that she was exploring through the *Domestic* series.

#### 1999

Upon completion of *Domestic* in 1998, Opie set off, yet again, on a journey across the country in December of 1999. The time that Opie had spent traveling around the country to finish the *Domestic* series had inspired her to embark on a larger project about the American landscape, creating the series *1999*.<sup>51</sup> The series documents the mostly depopulated rural landscapes of America's countryside and consists of images that included abandoned farmhouses, solitary roads, and street signs. The first image in the series is *Untitled #1, 1999* (Figure 29), which depicts a rural country store along a dusty dirty road nestled among a line of trees. The sign out front stands tall above the store and reads "PURE." Along the exterior side

---

<sup>51</sup> The series *1999* consists of twenty-eight chromogenic prints and was shot with a 6-x-7-centimeter camera. The series is published in its entirety in *Catherine Opie: 1999 & In and Around Home*, exh. cat. (Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006).

of the store there appears to be an antique Coca-Cola cooler, identified by the classic red and white logo on its front. This cooler and the worn sign suggest a time that has now past, since the “PURE” brand is unfamiliar to the viewer and the Coke cooler having been replaced by modern vending machines. The word “PURE” also conjures other associations that allow the viewer to consider their own meaning for the image. The documentary photographs that Opie created, such as *Untitled #1*, harken back to American photographers such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Swiss-born Robert Frank; photographers who contributed images of America that inform our very ideas of what is America.<sup>52</sup> Evans and Lange are noted for the work they produced for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) documenting the Great Depression era. Frank, as I previously mentioned, is known for producing *The Americans*, a book of photographs that he took while traveling across the country. For the *1999* series, Opie sought to investigate the American landscape and contribute to the vast image-bank of visualized America in the same way that she investigated lesbian domesticity to contribute to lesbian representation in American fine art photography. America, and life in America, is very much at the heart of Opie’s photographs, whether they are landscapes, portraits, or a combination of the two. In a much broader sense, *1999* is a continuation of Opie’s investigation of community. *Domestic* provided a precedent for Opie to document communities outside of her own in California and motivated her to create these images while traveling across the United States. “Catherine Opie’s entire artistic career,” Douglas Fogle has remarked, “can be seen as one long road trip across this

---

<sup>52</sup> Jessica Hough, “Rainbow Kite,” in *Catherine Opie: 1999 & In and Around Home*, (Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006), 118.

continent in search not of the American dream, but rather a dream of an idea of American community.”<sup>53</sup>

### Surfers

In 2004, Opie was selected to be included in the Whitney biennial for a second time, gaining further recognition for her photography with work from her series *Surfers*, 2003.<sup>54</sup> This series includes multiple seascapes from the same point of view as well as individual portraits of surfers with their boards, which is a departure from her earlier work depicting subcultures towards the mainstream, dominant culture. Even so, Opie is still studying the idea of community and how it is formed. It was through the *Domestic* series that Opie first attempted to venture beyond her tight-knit community of friends in Los Angeles and San Francisco and discovered that she was able to photograph communities other than her own.

*Surfers* focuses on the long periods of inactivity that exist between waves rather than the final result of the long wait, which would be a surfer riding a wave. These long periods of waiting are how surfers spend the majority of their time, which allows them to bond, forming a temporary community. The work selected for exhibition, *Untitled (Surfers) #11*, 2003 (Figure 30), is a seascape with almost unrecognizable surfers, floating together in the ocean, just waiting for a wave to form. This composition is similar to *Miggi & Ilene*, (Figure 15), from the *Domestic* series, in which the couple floats together in their backyard swimming pool. The other seascapes in the series depict various incarnations of this same scene all shot from the same vantage point. The portraits that accompany the seascapes in this series depict individual surfers,

---

<sup>53</sup> Douglas Fogle, “On the Road with Catherine Opie,” in *Catherine Opie: Skyways & Icehouses*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2002), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Chrissie Illes, Shamim M. Momin, and Debra Singer, *Whitney Biennial 2004*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 220.

just emerged from the ocean and holding their surfboards in a formal three-quarter length view. With these portraits, Opie demonstrates her ability to move outside her community and document other communities, not just her own, as she did with *Domestic*.

### *Self-Portrait/Nursing*

Also in 2004, Opie completed her third self-portrait with *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004 (Figure 31). If the *Domestic* series was Opie's way of questioning the idea of family and how it is constructed, then *Self-Portrait/Nursing* is her clear response. Before she created *Nursing* her self-portraits were about longing for domesticity, whereas now it is about having her own domesticity. Opie finally achieved her dream of having a family with the birth of her son, Oliver, in 2002. In *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, Opie faces the viewer for the first time in a classically maternal pose, borrowing again from art-historical imagery to create an image that recalls the Madonna and child. Set against a bright red and gold brocade background, Opie gazes down lovingly at her son who nurses as she holds him, unclothed, in her arms. Opie's ruddy, tattooed, and scarred skin contrasts sharply with Oliver's pure milky white skin. This last self-portrait completes the series that Opie started with *Self-Portrait/Cutting* and *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, (Figures 12 and 13), because it provides closure in Opie's search for a family: "Being able to come back and make *Self-Portrait/Nursing* with Oliver created a trilogy for me, where it ended the story a little bit."<sup>55</sup> In the first self-portrait, Opie clearly displays her desire for a family. In her second self-portrait, she displays her defiance of mainstream gay and lesbian organizations that saw members of the S/M community, like Opie, as subversive. Finally, in her third self-

---

<sup>55</sup> Opie quoted in Russell Ferguson, "I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie, May 2007," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, ed. by Jennifer Blessing, and Nat Trotman, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008) 258.

portrait, Opie displays her fulfillment of her desire for a family, with her scars still visible, a reminder to the viewer of Opie's struggles and her triumph.

### *In and Around Home*

What began with *Master Plan* in 1988 comes to a conclusion with *In and Around Home* (2004 – 2005).<sup>56</sup> If *Domestic* represents Opie's own desire for domesticity and a family, then *In and Around Home* represents the family that Opie finally created. The series offers a level of access to Opie's personal life that not even her self-portraits granted. It is by far her most personal work. *In and Around Home* operates on many different levels at once and it is Opie's most complex examination of community. By the time Opie started the series, her life had changed dramatically. She had started her own family, was in a domestic relationship with her partner, and had a successful career as an artist and tenured professor of photography at UCLA. The images in the series are an array of documentary photographs of Opie's own West Adams neighborhood in Los Angeles, Polaroid images of news clips taken from the television, and portraits of Opie's own family. The various images reflect the politics that seep into Opie's home via television, newspaper, and the activity around West Adams. The combination of images and their sequence in the series creates a tangled web of issues with Opie's home life at its center, revealing to the viewer that this complex view of the world is the artist's everyday experience.<sup>57</sup> For this section, the series will be discussed in terms of its sequencing in the exhibition catalogue from the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

---

<sup>56</sup> The series *In and Around Home* consists of thirty-four chromogenic prints and was shot with a 6-x-7-centimeter camera and thirty-one dye diffusion transfer prints shot with a Polaroid 600 Instant Camera. The series is published in its entirety in *Catherine Opie: 1999 & In and Around Home*, exh. cat. (Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Jessica Hough, "Rainbow Kite," in *Catherine Opie: 1999 & In and Around Home*, (Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006), 119.

The series opens with *Sunday Morning Breakfast*, 2004 (Figure 32), a photograph that offers a view into the artist's own home. Beyond a table set with breakfast and through a kitchen doorway sits a young boy playing with two dogs on the floor. This little blond-haired boy is Oliver, Opie's son with her partner Julie Burleigh. There is a clear connection between this image and *Joanne, Betsy, & Olivia, Bayside, New York*, (Figure 16), from the *Domestic* series. Both images are interior domestic scenes that depict a child playing in the morning just after breakfast. The only difference is that in *Sunday Morning Breakfast*., Opie's presence is not seen by the viewer, but rather understood or assumed. Also, the vertical (portrait) orientation of the image sets it apart from the typical horizontal (landscape) orientation of the images in *Domestic*. Opie evokes this similar scene with her own family to show the viewer that she now has the domesticity that she was investigating and longing for in her earlier series. If Opie were to add another image to the *Domestic* series, then *Sunday Morning Breakfast* would fit seamlessly into the group.

Opie also created portraits of her partner, Julie, and Julie's daughter Sarah. Julie assisted in creating a portrait of Opie herself as well. Interestingly, all three women are pictured with one or more of the family dogs. Julie is depicted as strong person with her arms crossed and her head cocked towards the camera. She stands outside the home with the dog by her side posed in a similar fashion, erect like a statue and ready to defend his home territory. Sarah's portrait, however, is rather tender as she is seated inside the home with a dog curled up in her lap. Both portraits have the same sense of formal composition that reflect Holbein's influence on Opie's portraiture style and follow the same conventions as the portraits in *Domestic*. Opie's own portrait, however, is much more casual and understated and stands in contrast to the way she chose to depict the other members of her family. Opie sits on the floor just inside her front door

which is open for the viewer to see inside. She wears pajamas and is holding her dog Nika in her lap. Given the various self-portraits that Opie has created up to this point, one would expect her to compose another formal portrait for this series. Finally at home, she chooses to show herself as she truly is without any unnecessary pomp.

The last image in the series is also a portrait of Oliver, titled *Oliver in a Tutu*, 2004 (Figure 33). This time Oliver stands on a chair in front of the stacked washer and dryer in the kitchen, just inside the back door of Opie's home which is wide open to the backyard. Oliver wears a USC t-shirt, pink tutu, and plastic tiara. Oliver's dress reminds the viewer of the royal portraits from Holbein that Opie referenced for *Portraits* and continues to reference in her photographs. His pose, standing on a chair, is dominating and the light that falls around him from the outside gives the viewer an awesome feeling. In the same way that the children are the focus of the family portraits and, therefore, the families in *Domestic*, so is Oliver the focus of Opie's domestic scenes and her own family. "In a certain way," Opie has said, "the family has become my community. Before, without having a family, I just created family through community."<sup>58</sup>

Looking at the work that Opie created after 1998 and leading up to the 2008 Guggenheim retrospective, one can see a clear influence from the *Domestic* series. Beginning with 1999, Opie was inspired to continue the road trip that she first began with *Domestic* and document community through images of the American landscape. It was for the *Domestic* series that Opie first ventured beyond her community of friends in California to photograph communities other than her own, and she continued to do so for the 1999 and the *Surfers* series. Opie created her third self-portrait with *Self-Portrait/Nursing* after the birth of her son, Oliver, and finally

---

<sup>58</sup> Russell Ferguson, "I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie, May 2007," in Catherine Opie: American Photographer, ed. Jennifer Blessing, Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 256.

documented the family that she had created with *In and Around Home*. The *Domestic* series not only influenced Opie's choice of subject matter, but also her continual investigation of community.

## Chapter 4: Lesbian Representation and Challenging Heteronormativity

In the context of American fine art photography, the *Domestic* series is significant for two reasons: first, by creating the series Opie contributes to and builds upon the body of photography pertaining to lesbian representation and second, by photographing lesbians in domestic settings, Opie provides an alternative perspective to the heteronormative view of domestic life in America as seen through documentary photographs. Opie felt that lesbians were underrepresented in American photography and she sought to create images that documented lesbian communities across the United States as well as to create images that would be recognized for their aesthetics as works of fine art. “I was trying to represent communities that weren’t being represented,” says Opie, “but also, in a way, to create that representation.”<sup>59</sup> Opie had already achieved this with her series *Portraits* and sought to do the same for *Domestic*. The MoMA exhibition that was a factor to motivate Opie to create the series, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, evidenced this lesbian underrepresentation in photography as it did not include any photographs of domestic scenes from the gay or lesbian communities. Opie created *Domestic* to fill the void left of lesbian domestic scenes in the exhibition, thereby offering an alternate view to the heteronormative images the show contained. In order to understand how Opie’s work contributes to lesbian representation in photography, I will provide a brief

---

<sup>59</sup> Russell Ferguson, "I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie, May 2007," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, ed. Jennifer Blessing, Nat Trotman, and Russell Ferguson (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008) 256.

background and summarize two important pieces of writing that concern lesbian representation, and essay by Jan Zita Grover and a book by Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser. These writings will demonstrate that documentary photographs of lesbians were not considered as lesbian representations in their discussions, as not to put the images at risk of being viewed as an attempt to normalize or naturalize lesbianism as a type of sexuality. I will then discuss how *Domestic* provides an alternative view of domestic life in the United States to counter heteronormativity.

### Lesbian Representation

During the late 1980s, Jan Zita Grover sought to study photographs of lesbian self-representation that were produced for distribution primarily within the cultural institutions of the lesbian community and secondarily within mainstream gallery settings in her essay “Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation” published in 1988.<sup>60</sup> In the 1970s and early 1980s, there tended to be two types of photographs of lesbian subjects that were made for consumption within the lesbian community: individual portraits of role models and of middle class lesbian couples. Central to the creation of these photographs is a conviction that it is a positive act to represent the lesbian community. In the words of lesbian artist Tee Corinne, “the images we see, as a culture, help define and expand our dreams, our perceptions of what is possible. Pictures of who we are help us visualize who we can be.”<sup>61</sup> These positive images of the lesbian community represented an ideal that was never pictured in the mainstream media. Deborah Bright writes that “by posing proudly for the camera, lesbians publicly proclaimed their right to exist in a society which outlawed and repudiated their relationships and affirmed their

---

<sup>60</sup> Jan Zita Grover, “Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation,” in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 163 – 197.

<sup>61</sup> Tee Corinne as quoted in *Ibid*, 177.

participation in one of the long-standing rituals of normative family life.”<sup>62</sup> In her study of these images, Grover intentionally excluded private photographs that she viewed as “record-keeping” because, “fascinating as they are, they are not intended to, nor do they, circulate through institutions that allow them opportunities to propose themselves as lesbian representations.”<sup>63</sup> Opie used these photographs of lesbians that Grover viewed as “record-keeping” as a point of reference for the photographs that she created for *Domestic*, taking the images a step further to create something different. What makes Opie’s photographs different is that she already had the critical success needed to provide her photographs the opportunity to circulate within the proper institutions of galleries and museums and propose themselves as lesbian representations. Opie has said, “I hope that the *Domestic* series creates images that people can engage with without necessarily having to think about them as positive images of gay women. I want them to think first that they are interesting as photographs.”<sup>64</sup> In her investigation of lesbian representations, Grover identified a scarcity of these images which she said affected the way in which the lesbian community produced and consumed photographs of themselves.<sup>65</sup> This scarcity of lesbian representations in American fine art photography is what Opie identified in the 1991 exhibition *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*.

In the 1990s, these positive images of lesbians were seemingly swept aside by a flood of sexually explicit and diverse photographs which assert and privilege an autonomous, defiant, and

---

<sup>62</sup> Deborah Bright, "Mirrors and Window Shoppers: Lesbians, Photography, and the Politics of Visibility," In *Over Exposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squires, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 26.

<sup>63</sup> Jan Zita Grover, "Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation," In *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 171.

<sup>64</sup> Russell Ferguson, "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part Two: May 2000," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 48.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

highly sexualized individuality. This change that developed in lesbian representation from positive images to diverse and sexually explicit images of lesbians explains how Opie was able to produce the *Portraits* series. Bright references Opie's series *Portraits* saying, "it was in this atmosphere of new openness to nonnormative genders and sexual complexity that a self-identified 'dyke daddy,' Catherine Opie, began making monumental large-format color studio portraits of transsexual and transgendered friends and acquaintances in Los Angeles and San Francisco."<sup>66</sup> It was not until Opie created *Portraits* that she received critical acclaim and recognition from the art world. Opie needed this critical acclaim for her portraits in *Domestic* to be considered as documentary lesbian representations that resist normalizing lesbian domesticity.

In an interview with Russell Ferguson in 1996, Opie discusses the series *Portraits* by saying "I probably wouldn't have done the work if I hadn't felt that I didn't like the way my community was being represented in the world."<sup>67</sup> Opie felt this same desire to represent her community when she created *Domestic* saying, "very rarely do you see big color photographs of lesbian domesticity."<sup>68</sup> What makes *Domestic* significant is that Opie traveled beyond her own community in California to document the larger community of lesbians living domestically across America for the series. Carol Vance has said that minority communities need affirmative images of themselves within the public arena: "People deprived of images become demoralized and isolated, and they become increasingly vulnerable to attacks on their private expressions of

---

<sup>66</sup> Deborah Bright, "Mirrors and Window Shoppers: Lesbians, Photography, and the Politics of Visibility," In *Over Exposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squires, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>67</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Russell Ferguson, "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part One: February 1996," in Kate Bush, ed., *Catherine Opie*, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 45.

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Opie as quoted in Deborah Picker, "Tall Tales," *LA Weekly*, May 14, 1999: 35.

nonconformity, which are inevitable once sources of public solidarity and resistance have been eliminated.”<sup>69</sup>

In 1991, British photographers Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser published *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs* which was a landmark publication and marked the increased visibility of lesbians due to AIDS activism. To accompany the book, Boffin and Fraser also held an exhibition. The goal of *Stolen Glances* was to make accessible to a wider audience of lesbians and the “independent” photography sector the photographic work by lesbians. The show was organized at the same time as the emergence of right-wing promotion of traditional family values, repression of diversity, and a growing climate of censorship.<sup>70</sup> Boffin and Fraser thought that lesbian photographers had “stolen” and inverted the meanings of mainstream, heterosexual imagery and the book addressed representation of lesbianism and lesbian identities in this way. Boffin and Fraser ask the question, what is lesbian photography and, in doing so, distinguish four kinds of works: documentary, mainstream, lesbian essence and overtly lesbian.<sup>71</sup> Photographs included constructed, staged, and self-consciously manipulated imagery that mirrored the socially constructed nature of sexuality.

The book and exhibition did not, however, include much documentary work as, in Boffin’s and Fraser’s opinion, the realism of documentary has often been used ideologically to reinforce notions of naturalness, and the authors did not seek to naturalize a “lesbian aesthetic” or to claim a natural status for lesbianism but rather to celebrate that there is no natural sexuality

---

<sup>69</sup> Carol Vance, “The War on Culture,” *Art in America* 77 (September 1989), 39-43.

<sup>70</sup> While Boffin and Fraser were working in England, the United States was experiencing a similar climate of repression, censorship, and opposition to subcultures including the lesbian community.

<sup>71</sup> Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser, “Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), 551.

at all.<sup>72</sup> This is a similar position that Grover took towards documentary photographs in her investigation of lesbian self-representation during the late 1980s. Opie, however, rejects such a claim and defends the documentary aspect of *Domestic* by saying, “I have a huge problem with descriptions of us being normal. This isn’t trying to be normal—the feel-good, happy lesbian couple together—it just is.”<sup>73</sup> By creating *Domestic*, Opie was attempting to produce documentary photographs that could be considered as proper lesbian representations without being seen as attempt to normalize lesbian representations. Despite this absence of documentary images, Boffin and Fraser acknowledge the crucial importance of a diversity of representation for the lesbian and gay communities.

### Challenging Heteronormativity

I will now address how *Domestic* provides an alternate perspective to the heteronormative view of domesticity in America as seen through documentary photographs. Anthropological studies of lesbian and gay men show how their chosen families are composed of a fluid structure of kinship ties based on social identity, friendship, and emotional commitment.<sup>74</sup> These families are not easily recognizable because they are not patterned on conventional biological and marital ties and are the kinds of families that Opie sought to depict in the *Domestic* series, such as the family portrait *Mary Ellen, Ann, Gunner, Zoe, & Nora* (Figure 18) and the group portrait *Flipper, Tanya, Chloe & Harriet* (Figure 26). As such, they are “unconventional” in the sense that there are not widely shared institutionalized understandings of

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 551.

<sup>73</sup> Catherine Opie as quoted in Vince Aletti, "Lesbian Domestic," *Out*, April 1999, 33.

<sup>74</sup> Kath Weston, *Families We Choose*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

chosen families as families. Opie describes this notion of an “unconventional” family when discussing the idea of community in her work:

“The underlying basis of all my work has been about the structure of urban and suburban space, and about how communities begin to form. I’m curious about the way family begins to be defined with community. In a suburban community the family is defined by the individual house. In the gay and lesbian S/M community, family is defined by those members who get together on holiday, and who are close friends.”<sup>75</sup>

Feminist and queer anthropological challenges to concepts of kinship and family pushed anthropologists to question the core symbols and meanings of any cultural system of kinship, going as far as questioning the assumption that ‘male’ and ‘female’ are two natural categories of human beings.<sup>76</sup> As Elizabeth Blackwood writes, these accounts have not completely destabilized heteronormative models of kinship and the relatively subdued impact of feminist and queer challenges to heteronormativity may speak more to the ability of such challenges to be absorbed within mainstream models of kinship.<sup>77</sup>

The social construction of the family is based on a biological model of reproduction in which there is one male, the father, and one female, the mother. Within the family, gender is enmeshed with heteronormativity—that the family unit is organized around one man and one woman. When lesbian couples construct themselves as two-parent families, as with Opie’s portrait *Catherine, Melanie and Sadie Rain* (Figure 17), they directly challenge normative conceptions of the traditional model of the two-parent family as it is socially and legally

---

<sup>75</sup> Catherine Opie quoted in Russell Ferguson, “How I Think’: An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part One: February 1996,” in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Kate Bush, (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 45.

<sup>76</sup> Jane Fishburne Collier and Sylvia Juko Yanagisako, *Gender and Kinship: Essays toward a Unified Analysis*, ed. Jane Fishburne Collier and Sylvia Juko Yanagisako, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>77</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, “Wedding bell blues: Marriage, missing men, and matrifocal families,” *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 1 (February 2005): 7.

constructed from a biological model of reproduction.<sup>78</sup> More specifically, most lesbian two-parent families, including Opie's own family, consist of one biological parent and one social parent, a configuration that directly challenges traditional models of the family. These normative conceptions of the traditional model of the family are what Opie was seeking to capture when she photographed *Dickason Family* (Figure 7) for her series *Master Plan*: a biological model of family with a father and mother. Opie says, "So much of what we define as being domestic has to do with a heterosexual framework. A family doesn't have to be a mom and a dad and a kid. We build family and community in other ways, too."<sup>79</sup> Families such as these challenge gendered understandings as well as heteronormative conceptions of the family. By photographing these lesbian families in *Domestic*, Opie documents and strengthens this challenge to present an alternative to the heteronormative view of domesticity in American fine art photography.

---

<sup>78</sup> Susan B. Dalton and Denise D. Biebley, "'That's Our Kind of Constellation': Lesbian Mothers Negotiate Institutionalized Understandings of Gender within Family," *Gender & Society* 14, no. 1 (February 2000): 40.

<sup>79</sup> Catherine Opie as quoted in Deborah Picker, "Tall Tales," *LA Weekly*, May 14, 1999: 35.

## Conclusion

In the photographic series titled *Domestic*, Opie combines portrait and documentary photography in order to give representation to the lesbian community as well as present an alternative to the heteronormative view of domestic life in America. *Domestic* is a series that depicts lesbian women from across the United States in scenes of domesticity, living as couples, families, and housemates. At the center of this series lies the idea of community and the question of how community is constructed, a theme which unites Opie's seemingly disparate bodies of work. In order for her images to be successful and resist a claim of normalization of her subject, Opie relied on formal portrait conventions to photograph her subjects in and outside of their actual homes. The result was a series of photographs representing the lesbian community that are aesthetically pleasing as well as documentary.

Opie's interest in community was clear from her earliest photographs taken as a child and her graduate thesis series *Master Plan*. In the ten year span after completing her thesis and leading up to *Domestic*, Opie created documentary landscapes and portraits that focused on the idea of community. She separately documented the people that comprise a particular community as well as the communities that the people inhabit. For her portraits, Opie drew upon the portrait conventions of painting with Holbein as her influence in order to draw the viewer into the image and consider a work that they would normally not look at. By creating the *Portraits* and *Houses*

series, Opie had established herself in these two genres of photography and led the way for her to create *Domestic*.

In the *Domestic* series, Opie combined her portraiture and documentary photography and traveled beyond her own community to photograph lesbian communities across the United States. She created three types of portraits for the series which are family, couple, and group portraits. She posed her subjects and staged the scenes for the portraits, yet she photographed in and outside of their actual homes. In doing this, Opie aestheticized the portraits in order to draw the viewer into image and allowing them to consider an image that they might not look at otherwise. The portraits also remain documentary in essence and resist claims that they attempt to normalize the lesbian community.

Opie desired to create this series because of the lack of lesbian domestic scenes in the 1991 exhibition *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* which, according to the show's curator Peter Galassi, was supposed to depict domestic life in America. Opie responded to this show by creating images of lesbian domesticity that directly recall the heteronormative depictions of family that Tina Barney had become well known for and were included in the exhibition. Opie had a personal motivation to create the series as well, which is evidenced by two self-portraits she created that reflect her desire for family and domesticity. While Opie was creating *Domestic*, she was considering what it would be like to have a family and live domestically with a partner.

During the time between the completion of *Domestic* and the mid-career retrospective at the Guggenheim in 2008, Opie created works that reflected a clear influence from the series. In the series *1999*, Opie felt inspired by the road trip she took to create *Domestic* and decided to continue her road trip to document community, not through people, but through images of the

American landscape. Opie continued to combine portraiture and documentary photography with the *Surfers* series in 2004. After traveling beyond her community in Los Angeles to photograph for *Domestic*, Opie was inspired to document other types of communities, such as a community of surfers. Opie created her third self-portrait with *Self-Portrait/Nursing* after the birth of her son, Oliver, and finally documented the family that she had created with *In and Around Home*. The *Domestic* series not only influenced Opie's choice of subject matter, but also her continual investigation of community.

The *Domestic* series serves as a contribution to lesbian representation in American fine art photography because of a lack of such representations in mainstream photographic exhibitions such as *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*. Also, documentary images of the lesbian community, such as those in *Domestic*, were often excluded from discussions of lesbian representations for fear that they might be read as attempts to normalize lesbian images. Opie, however, was able to successfully create documentary lesbian representations because she had already received recognition and critical success for the series *Portraits*. This gave Opie access to the mainstream art world and provided the opportunity for her photographs to circulate within the proper institutions of galleries and museums and propose themselves as lesbian representations that resist normalization. Of her oeuvre, Opie has said, "I have represented this country and this culture. And I'm glad that there is a queer, out, dyke artist that's being called an American photographer."<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Opie quoted in Russell Ferguson, "I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie, May 2007," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, ed. by Jennifer Blessing, and Nat Trotman, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008) 264.

## Bibliography

## Bibliography

- Aletti, Vince. "Lesbian Domestic." *Out*, April 1999: 32-33.
- . "American Women." *Village Voice*, April 18, 2000: 69.
- Blackwood, Evelyn. "Wedding bell blues: Marriage, missing men, and matrifocal families." *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 1 (February 2005): 3-19.
- Blessing, Jennifer. "Cathy's World." In *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, edited by Jennifer Blessing, and Nat Trotman, 11-29. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008.
- Boffin, Tessa, and Jean Fraser. "Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs." *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 550-562.
- Bright, Deborah. "Mirrors and Window Shoppers: Lesbians, Photography, and the Politics of Visibility." In *Over Exposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. by Carol Squires, 24-47. New York: The New Press, 1999.
- Bush, Kate, ed. *Catherine Opie*. London: Photographer's Gallery, 2000.
- Christofori, Ralf. "Catherine Opie." In *Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, by Max Hollein, & Martina Weinhart, 197-199. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005.
- Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review: Catherine Opie." *The New York Times*, April 7, 2000: 40.
- Dalton, Susan B., and Denise D. Bieibly. "'That's Our Kind of Constellation': Lesbian Mothers Negotiate Institutionalized Understandings of Gender within Family." *Gender & Society* 14, no. 1 (February 2000): 36-61.
- Dartnall, Colette. "Interview with Catherine Opie." In *Catherine Opie*, ed. by Colette Dartnall, & Elizabeth A. T. Smith, 3-6. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997.
- Decter, Joshua. "Between Observation and Engagement: Catherine Opie as Interlocutor, Picturing Lives." In *Catherine Opie*, ed. by Kate Bush, 52-54. London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000.

- Dykstra, Jean. "Opie: The Community of Difference." *Art in America* 96, no. 11 (December 2008): 128-135.
- . "Road Trip." 4, no. 6 (June 2006): 40-42.
- Ferguson, Russell. "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part One: February 1996." In *Catherine Opie*, edited by Kate Bush, 44-47. London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000.
- . "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie, Part Two: May 2000." In *Catherine Opie*, edited by Kate Bush, 140-142. London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2000.
- . "I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie, May 2007." In *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, ed. by Jennifer Blessing, and Nat Trotman, 256-264. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008.
- Fogle, Douglas. "On the Road with Catherine Opie." In *Skyways and Icehouses*, by Catherine Opie, 5. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2002.
- Galassi, Peter. *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991.
- Grover, Jan Zita. "Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation." In *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. by Richard Bolton, 163-202. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1989.
- Hawkins, Margaret. "Searching for identity; Photographer looks to outsiders." *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 1, 2000: 50.
- Heartney, Eleanor. "Worldwide Women." *Art in America*, June/July 2007: 155-165.
- Hough, Jessica. "Rainbow Kite." In *Catherine Opie: 1999 & In and Around Home*, ed. by Catherine Opie, and Jessica Hough, 117-121. Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006.
- Illes, Chrissie, Shamim M. Momin, and Debra Singer. *Whitney Biennial 2004*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.
- Kertess, Klaus, and John Ashbery. *1995 Biennial Exhibition*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995.
- Leffingwell, Edward. "Catherine Opie at Gorney Bravin + Lee." *Art in America*, July 2000: 105.
- McKenna, Kristine. "Welcome to Opie's World." *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1994, Calendar section, 8.

- Myers, Terry R. "Catherine Opie: In and Around Home." *Art Review*, September 2006: 142.
- Ottman, Klaus. *Still Points of the Turning World: Sixth International Biennial Exhibition*, 2006. Sante Fe, N.M.: SITE Sante Fe, 2006.
- Pagel, David. "Catherine Opie." *Art Issues*, September-October 1994: 45.
- Picker, Deborah. "Tall Tales." *LA Weekly*, May 14, 1999: 35.
- Regen Projects. "Catherine Opie: The "Domestic" Series." press release. April 1999.
- Reilly, Maura. "The Drive to Describe: An Interview with Catherine Opie." *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 82-95.
- Saltz, Jerry. "L.A. Rising." *Art & Auction*, April 1994: 88-91, 122.
- Smith, Elizabeth A. T. "Catherine Opie's Los Angeles Topographies." In *Catherine Opie*, edited by Colette Dartnall, and Elizabeth A. T. Smith, 7-10. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997.
- Smith, Roberta. "Body of Evidence." *Vogue*, August 1994: 150-154.
- Trotman, Nat. "Domestic." In *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, edited by Jennifer Blessing, and Nat Trotman, 120-21. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008.
- Vance, Carol. "The War on Culture." *Art in America* 77 (September 1989), 39-43.
- Wang, Michael. "Catherine Opie." *The Harvard Photography Journal* 8 (2001): 5-9.
- Weston, Kath. *Families We Choose*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

## Appendix A

### List of Portraits

A complete list of the portraits exhibited in the *Domestic* series thus far has not been published. Assistant Curator Nat Trotman writes in the exhibition catalog for *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* that there are thirteen portraits in the series, however only seven are listed in the catalog. No extensive list of the portraits considered in the series has been published so I attempt to do so here. The website for Opie's west coast gallery, Regen Projects, also lists works in the series however it only has twelve.<sup>81</sup> I sought out what could be the thirteenth portrait that Trotman references, but does not list, and found it in a 2000 review in *Art in America* of the series while on view at Gorney Bravin + Lee in New York City. The list is below.

1. Miggi & Ilene, Los Angeles, California, 1995
2. Flipper, Tanya, Chloe & Harriet, San Francisco, California, 1995
3. Michelle & Melissa, Los Angeles, California, 1995
4. Catherine, Melanie and Sadie Rain, 1998
5. Deb & Pattie, New York, New York, 1998
6. Eleanor & Megan, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998

---

<sup>81</sup> Catherine Opie, *Domestic*, 1995 – 1998. <<http://www.regenprojects.com/exhibitions/1999-04-catherine-opie/#1>>

7. Emily, Sts, & Becky, Durham, North Carolina, 1998
8. Joanne, Betsy & Olivia, Bayside, New York, 1998
9. Kristopher & Clara, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1998
10. Mary Ellen, Ann, Gunner, Zoe, & Nora, NYC, New York, 1998
11. Melissa & Lake, Durham, North Carolina, 1998
12. Norma & Eyenga, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1998
13. Tammy Rae & Kaia, Durham, North Carolina, 1998

## Appendix B

### Exhibition History

Here is a history of the exhibition of *Domestic*.

- 2008 “Catherine Opie: American Photographer,” Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 26, 2008 – January 7, 2009
- 2000 “Catherine Opie,” The Photographers Gallery, London, England, August 9 – September 24; travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, November 18, 2000 – February 18, 2001, cat.
- “Catherine Opie,” Art Pace, San Antonio, TX, April 6 – July 2
- “Catherine Opie,” Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York, NY, March 18 – April 15
- 1999 “Domestic,” Regen Projects, Los Angeles, CA, April 17 – May 22