

**Catherine Opie,  
Portraiture, and  
the Decoy of the  
Iconographic**

**by  
David J. Getsy**

The first thing I saw was Mary Kelly's hair. Looking through the new works that Catherine Opie recently exhibited at Regen Projects, it was Kelly's famous up-do that arrested me—even from behind. For those who have seen it, it is unmistakable. Ten years ago, I was on a panel with Kelly, whose work I had long respected but whom I had never met. The hair, I learned then, was part of her signature look, iconic in the Los Angeles art scene.

Kelly's presence makes sense. Not only are she and Opie colleagues at UCLA, but portraiture is central to Opie's practice. Opie also has deep engagements with both landscape and documentary photography, but it was portraiture that brought her international attention early in her career and that has continued as a primary avenue of investigation. The recent works amplify and distill Opie's interrogation of the portrait mode even as they represent a departure for her. Encountering this portrait of Kelly, and then moving through the rest of Opie's recent body of work, I was struck by its embrace of allegory and symbolism. To achieve that, these new portraits turned on such spectacular and symbolic details as Kelly's hair (see fig. 1). This tactic was also there in Lawrence Weiner's sagely beard, her son Oliver's sartorial aplomb, Idexa's tattoos, and Jonathan Franzen's open book. Without a doubt, these photographs

are intimate records of friendships and relationships, but they also clearly aspired to be more than that. Talking about her intention with these works, Opie has asked: "What is a new allegory?" and "How do we do that with people that are in my life today?"<sup>1</sup> The recent works push the exemplary detail to such questions of symbolism and cultural legibility and prompt us to try to interpret the portrait as allegory. As I will discuss, this symbolic turn in Opie's recent work can illuminate some of the tactics of her earlier photographs as well as the terms of her ongoing investment in portraiture.

With their overt references to the history of painting, maybe it's not surprising that these new works by Opie would lean on and complicate the idea of the "attribute." The term is art-historical, and it refers to the saints' identifying objects and garments. The attribute is the symbol that allows us to recognize which saint or character is which, and the study of the complexity and shifting uses of such attributes is a cornerstone of the history of art. This scholarly practice was developed to grapple with the semantic and rhetorical sophistication of art produced primarily within a religious frame. Iconography, the deployment and study of recognizable and repeatable pictorial signs and symbols, is one of the bases of the discipline of art history, and it registered the centuries-long trafficking in such symbols by artists.

1. Quoted in Sharon Mizota, "Catherine Opie: From the Outside In," *KCET online* (26 February 2013). Accessed online, 29 August 2013, at [kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/los-angeles/catherine-opie-regen-projects.html](http://kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/los-angeles/catherine-opie-regen-projects.html)



Figure 1. *Mary*, 2012, pigment print, 50 x 38.4 in. oval



Figure 2. *Anthony & Michael*, 2012, pigment print, 77 x 58 in.

(Both the symbols themselves and their study are now referred to as “iconography.”) The iconographic sign is, among other things, transportable between paintings, and its ability to function in different pictorial contexts is one of its defining traits. For instance, a common iconographic marker of the Virgin Mary is her blue robe, and the presence of any woman dressed in blue in a painting raised the question about whether it depicted Mary or not. Painters marshaled a host of interlocking symbol-systems to lend their paintings religious or philosophical depth of meaning. Without familiarity with the iconographic code, the meanings of such paintings were incomplete at best and incomprehensible at worst—just like the in-crowd symbol of an important contemporary artist’s famous hair style.

Opie’s work has long drawn on the traditions of Renaissance and Baroque art. Her career-making portraits of the 1990s, for instance, were regularly commented upon as being crafted by Opie in relation to the precedent of Hans Holbein, from whom she borrowed her sitters’ unflinching, searching, and neutral gaze.<sup>2</sup> All of Opie’s photographs are energized by her familiarity with the history of art. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the recent work, however. With their moody black backgrounds, extreme lighting, and arch compositions, these works foreground their citations

of Baroque religious paintings, in particular. In *Anthony & Michael* (see fig. 2), we have a Pietà, and Weiner could be a doge. *Kate & Laura* could be offering an Annunciation or a temptation. Indeed, Opie’s new work is aggressively mannered in its compositions, references, and overall mood. The darkly isolated figures in raking light, the oval formats, and the held expressions all evidence a significant departure for Opie. Even though they *are* portraits, these works seem less like portraits than any of Opie’s previous work.

Not to mention the blood. It’s a recurring symbol in the works: flowing from behind the hands of Opie’s trainer, David, as he covers his genitals; dripping from the kiss between Julie and Pigpen (see fig. 5); and represented with the red threads that bind Julie’s lips in the photograph titled *Friends* (see fig. 17). The fact that blood is a self-conscious iconographic sign for these works is figured directly in *Kate & Laura*, where the two sisters work on an embroidered image of a drip (see fig. 3). A picture within a picture, this image of blood offers the inverse of the other black ovals in the show. It is a white plane with a represented stain—the viscosity of blood rendered through a material used to bind, sew, and join.

In both the self-conscious staging of the look of Baroque painting and the flamboyant emphasis on blood

2. See, for instance, Catherine Opie and Maura Reilly, “A Drive to Describe: An Interview with Catherine Opie,” *Art Journal* 60.2 (Summer 2001): 90; Catherine Opie and Russell Ferguson, “I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie, 2007” in Jennifer Blessing, ed., *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 257; and Catherine Opie and Douglas Crimp, “In Conversation,” in John Welchman, ed., *The Aesthetics of Risk* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2008), 301.



Figure 3. *Kate & Laura*, 2012, pigment print, 77 x 58 in.

and its analogues, Opie alerts us to the fact that symbolism is paramount in these works. Indeed, she has forthrightly stated that this work represents an embrace of allegory for her, and the symbols she is using in these works are meant to figure the issue of menopause. She has remarked, "For me, the blood becomes metaphorical in relationship

to my own body."<sup>3</sup> Speaking of *David* (see fig. 4) she said, "Blood is referenced throughout this body of work. Like with Dave, the reason why he's bleeding—and a lot of people have unfortunately read it as castration—it's really because he's my trainer and he's been working me out for three years and it's the closest relationship I've ever had

3. Catherine Opie and Susannah Tantemsapya, "Catherine Opie on What's In a Picture," *Whitewall Magazine* (18 March 2013). Accessed online, 29 August 2013, at [whitewallmag.com/all/art/catherine-opie-on-whats-in-a-picture](http://whitewallmag.com/all/art/catherine-opie-on-whats-in-a-picture)



Figure 4. *David*, 2012, pigment print, 67 x 30 in.



Figure 5. *Julie & Pippen*, 2012, pigment print, 50 x 30 in.

with a man. During that time period I stopped bleeding so he begins to bleed for me.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, Opie has chosen to visualize and symbolize a commonly experienced event that rarely, if ever, becomes visualized. Menopause has no iconography, no established visual signs (unlike, say, puberty, which has a long-running set of visual conventions for alerting

viewers to the represented body’s stage of life). Countering that, Opie created a set of images that brings this content to light through the mobilization of symbolic details that, together, establish an iconography for menopause among the works.

Taken as a whole, these photographs lean on this newly forged iconography to create an extended



Figure 6. *Rocco*, 2012, pigment print, 50 x 38.4 in.

metaphor shared between the works. The allegorical message of the series comes into focus as an exploration of the act of embracing, celebrating, and remembering the change to a new relationship with one’s body and its horizons. In general, allegories are defined as extended, repeated metaphors that cumulatively establish a greater meaning for a text or—in a

usage more specific to the history of art—as figurative embodiments of concepts or ideals. Opie does both in this series. The cumulative allegory of the embrace of bodily change frames all of the works in the series, even as each photograph stages its own more specific and individual allegorical figuration. Opie reflected on this work, “I did want to bring allegory into the

4. In Yasmine Mohseni, “A Q&A with Catherine Opie about her Bold New Body of Work at Regen Projects,” *Blouin ArtInfo* (15 March 2013). Accessed online, 29 August 2013, at [www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/878768/aqa-with-catherine-opie-about-her-bold-new-body-of-work-at](http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/878768/aqa-with-catherine-opie-about-her-bold-new-body-of-work-at)

work. In a history of portraiture, there is allegory, but it's often in relationship to religion or symbolism. What is symbolism in relationship to my place in life right now?"<sup>5</sup> This is an important statement, since it registers Opie's attitude toward symbolism, allegory, and iconography. They are all rooted in "my place in life right now." Rather than aiming at a universal iconography, Opie instead grounds her deployment of symbols in personal meanings and histories. This "personal" emerges from Opie's shared intimacy with her sitters, many of whom are recurring subjects for her and woven deeply into her life. Consequently, the allegorical and iconographic meanings of the works are often inscrutable or only partially legible outside of those intimacies, contexts, and relationships.

Opie's focus on Mary Kelly's hair reminds us of this. It is a symbol too—iconic as a personal trait could be. It wasn't, however, played out as self-consciously symbolic like the use of red thread and liquid. Many who have never seen Kelly could take this portrait as an unspecified allegory or just an unidentified "Mary." Even then, they couldn't miss the hair. Those who are part of Opie's community, however, recognize and affiliate with that coded attribute. They see "Mary Kelly," the important and highly regarded artist. They feel comforted by its recognizability, and they knowingly respect Opie's nod to the Angeleno artistic community. It's

still an iconographic attribute, but a self-made and community-specific one. Similarly, individual tattoos and scars in her portraits are recognizable to some viewers as marks of affinity and transformation proudly and quietly present (see fig. 6 and 7). Throughout this body of work, Opie plays up the iconographic even as she complicates it and invents new additions. This performing of the attribute serves to drive the weighty symbolism of the citations to Baroque painting as well as the more personal or community-specific trafficking in signs to which some viewers will be attuned. Overall, these photographs *demand* to be read as allegories—as more than portraits. Opie's friends, peers, and family are exposed in a largely matter-of-fact way, in keeping with her investment in documentary and in portraiture. However, this work couches her sitters in the long history of the allegorical portrait in both painting and photography (see fig. 8 and 9). Using just enough attributes and symbols—some overt, some personal, and others community-specific—Opie prompts the viewer to interpret rather than inspect the sitter. That is, these works deploy iconography as a decoy, concentrating it so that we start to ask of these works questions of legibility, symbolization, and allegory rather than questions of personhood and portraiture.

Underneath this decoy—the Trojan



Figure 7. *Idexa*, 2012, pigment print, 50 x 38.4 in.

5. Opie and Tantemsapya 2013, n.p.



Figure 8. *Oliver & Mrs. Nibbles*, 2012, pigment print, 33 x 25 in.

horse of the iconographic—Opie’s photographs exude their sympathy, their love, and the long-running relationships that make up her life and her community. My recognition of Kelly occurred at just one of the uppermost levels of these nested

attributes, and it relates to the still-public world of the art community. At first, it made me feel like part of the circle, seeing the sign. I soon realized that it also reminded me how much I didn’t—and couldn’t—know, when faced with each of these portraits.

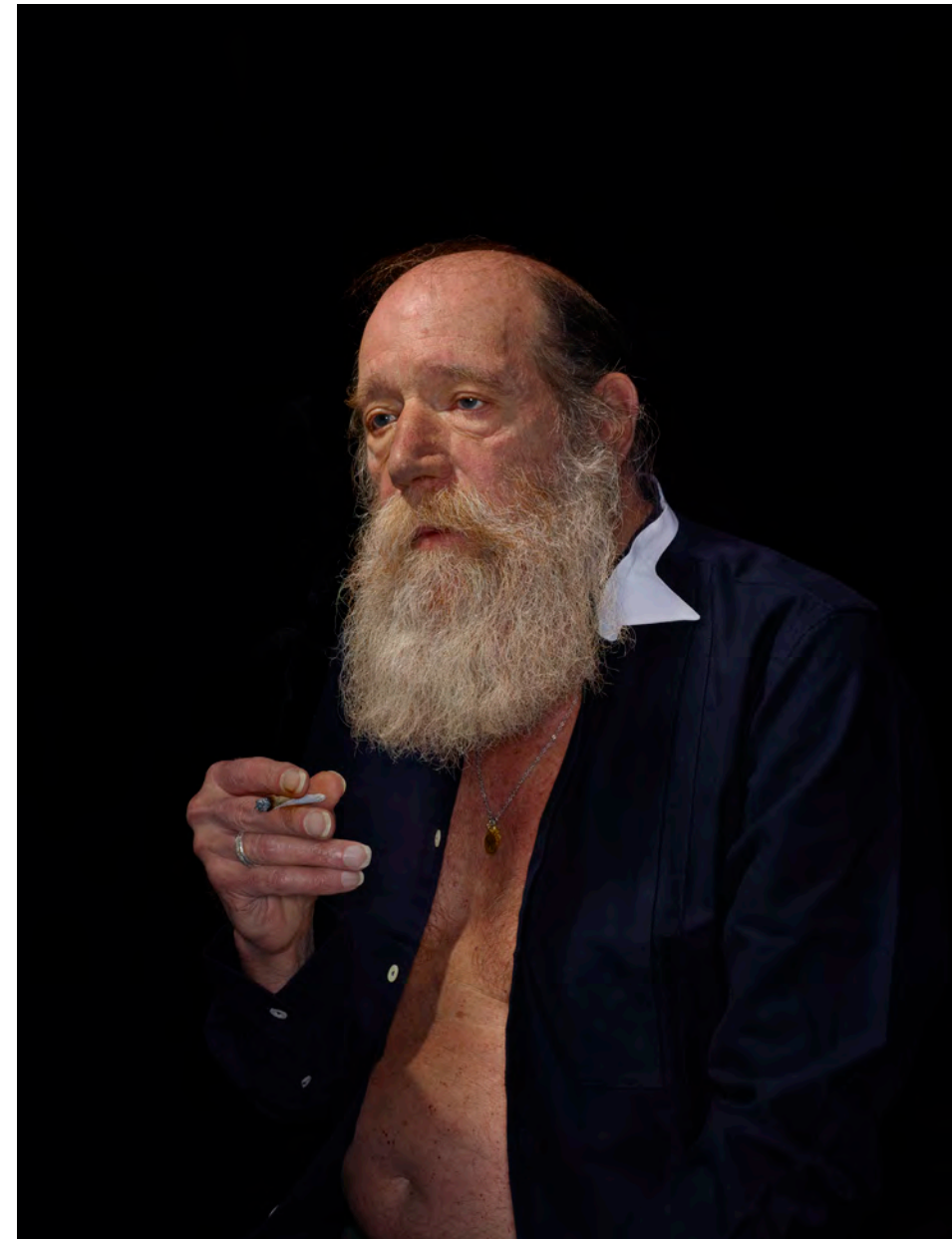


Figure 9. *Lawrence (Black Shirt)*, 2012, pigment print, 33 x 25 in.

Those deeper layers of coding, of shared private signs, of community attributes, were partially or fully opaque to me, even though I could see that they were there. Those closer to Opie, no doubt, see these works more readily for what they

are: loving and enduring testimonies to shared lives and sympathies. By contrast, those outside of that circle are induced to encounter these works as allegories and follow the decoy of their self-conscious performance of the iconographic detail—exaggerated

6. One of the central lessons that the scholarship on transgender theory and history has taught is that gender's transformability is endlessly open to new mutabilities but that successive identities are the results of sustained effort, self-determination, exploration, and commitment. Theories of gender performativity (most notably, those of Judith Butler) were misunderstood by many queer theorists who came to champion gender as endlessly "fluid." In both supportive and antagonistic literatures, these accounts of gender's purported fluidity wittingly or unwittingly implied a nonspecificity and, indeed, fickleness that many trans theorists rejected as being not just unrelated to transgender lives but also prejudicial against them. For a primer on transgender studies and its emergence as a discipline, see Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 1–17.

almost to the point of artifice and tableaux in some of the works. The spectacle of these attributes allows Opie to expose her intimacies and sympathies in public, shielding herself and her sitters from at least some of the voyeuristic exposure commonly expected of portrait photography.

This move made by the recent work points to a long-running dynamic that has been present in different intensities throughout Opie's portraiture oeuvre. I began to look at the early works in a different light, reconsidering the self-conscious performativity of their attributes and the way they, too, offered a decoy that allowed a collusion of intimacies between Opie and her sitter to emerge in the very public form of large-scale portrait photography. Even though her earlier works seemed to aim more at the documentary than at the allegorical, they nevertheless evidence her long-running strategy of using bold iconographic plays to distract attention from the person rather than promising to explain their depths.

This is, after all, the theme of *Being and Having* (1991), the remarkable series of portrait photographs that established Opie's career (see fig. 10 and 11). In it, Opie collaborated with her sitters, who adopted marks of identification of age, race, gender, and class. Some are clearly false (the visibly fake mustache) and others ambiguous (how do we read

that eyebrow?). What is brilliant about these photographs is the way they suspend readability between these two options. We see fake mustaches and real eyebrows, and the viewer is prompted to try and read the authentic only to be caught up in Opie and her sitters' trap. These photographs remind us that individuality and identity are never easily or wholly legible.

These works were hailed at the time for their playfulness and their performativity—just when there was a widening recognition that gender was not a cultural expression of a biological certainty. Rather, it was revealed to be a constantly shifting field of ad-hoc declarations of one's relation to others' performed genders and to the divergent ways in which bodies could be inhabited and presented. *Being and Having* plays up the performativity of its sitters, and many—erroneously, I would say—have seen the series merely as an illustration of the fluidity of gender. This misses the point. Gender isn't fluid, non-descript, or ephemeral.<sup>6</sup> It is mutable but nothing if not hard-worked. Adopting outward signs of gender ambiguity or non-conformity can be a casual choice for some, but for others who seek to transform themselves successively into a gender of their making or choosing, such outward signs are highly cathected, deeply felt, and politically performed. Opie's *Being and Having* doesn't



Figure 10. *Ingin*, 1991, chromogenic print and wood frame with metal nameplate, 17 x 22 in.

represent an open, fluid possibility for gender. Rather, it spectacularly performs gender as an iconography itself. The photographs tell us nothing about the sitters themselves but, rather, reinforce our compulsion to attempt to read the signs of gender, here performed "wrongly" as a means of isolating and illustrating them. Many mistook these works as portraits when they were really illustrations of the sign-system of gender. Like Opie's

newest works, these early portraits, too, performed iconography as a decoy, getting us caught up in the reading of signs so as to distract from the people who gave themselves up to our gazes. In this, Opie is protective and caring for her sitters, shielding them behind the applied attributes.

Opie's work after *Being and Having* continued on this path. Her series of portraits of transgender, genderqueer, and other non-conforming persons





Figure 11. *Bo*, 1991, chromogenic print and wood frame with metal nameplate, 17 x 22 in.

that followed in the 1990s chronicled the infinite particularity with which we can craft our lives and our bodies. *Portraits* (1993–97) also extended her practice of portraiture, using the bold display of difference and modification to challenge the viewer to read the iconography of identity (see fig. 12, 13, and 16). Viewers were left suspended in a state of reading and identifying as they confronted Opie’s friends’ bold external self-fashioning. As she

7. Opie and Reilly, 2001, 91.

remarked, “Another thing about the portraits that always amazes me is the way people just obsess about whether the sitter is a boy, a girl, a M2F transsexual, or a drag queen! I don’t like to think about that body of work in terms of gender, or gender-bending. I was just documenting a community of people who happened, coincidentally, to be interested in those ideas.”<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, Opie presented

a sympathetic portrait of her community, but it is also important to recognize *how* she chose to depict those friends and allies. She knew all too well these individuals’ distinct modes of self-presentation would seem unconventional, unnerving, or confusing to viewers at the time, and she developed a mode of portrait photography that allowed those self-determined traits, modifications, and attributes to take the foreground without instrumentalizing or objectifying the friends she photographed. Their proud displays served to do justice to the sitters and their lives while also challenging the viewer with the partiality of their ability to read—with their incomplete facility with others’ self-made iconographies. Opie stated that while her sitters “see [something] within themselves that I end up capturing,” it is also the case that “when [other] people see [the portraits] they have to question their own relationship to what they are seeing.”<sup>8</sup> This double use is precisely what Opie’s tactics amplify: the ability of the portraits to be deeply personal and affective while at the same time being partial or opaque to the gaze of anonymous viewers. Remember, Opie appears again as “Bo” in the series, challenging us to choose between iconographic legibility and the expectations of meaningfulness often located in the artist’s self-portrait. Whereas *Being and Having* played



Figure 12. *Richard*, 1994, chromogenic print, 40 x 30 in.

with stable gendered iconographies used incorrectly or queerly, *Portraits* celebrated people who performed uniqueness and incomplete legibility. Their tattoos, gender presentations, piercings, and other hard-won attributes of selfhood were displayed for all to see as a challenge about how little could be known from *just looking*. What is so captivating about those early portraits is not their honesty and empathy, but rather their proud legibility of illegibility.

Portraiture is invasive, let’s not forget.<sup>9</sup> It purports to show the face, in all its minute detail, as the replete representation of the person. The complexity of subjectivity is supposed to be condensed into the portrait, and artists have for centuries struggled with what is lost and gained when such a distillation and reduction is attempted. In this, the sitter is often

8. Catherine Opie and Russell Ferguson, “How I Think, Part I: An Interview with Catherine Opie, 1996” in Jennifer Blessing, ed., *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 103–104.

9. As Susan Sontag stated, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.” Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 41.



Figure 13. *Idexa*, 1993, chromogenic print, 20 x 16 in.

sacrificed. They become the image to be read, to be evaluated, and to be inspected. This is the power dynamic enjoyed by those looking at portraits, especially photographic ones. In many ways, it cannot be escaped. Opie knows this well, and it is acknowledged throughout her practice. She attempts to redirect our penetrating, voyeuristic gazing at portraits to outward, arbitrary attributes and iconographies. On sustained looking, however, the viewer's confidence in their ability to read the iconographies of identity is eroded, leaving them aware not only of those overtly performed signs but also of the encroachment of equally prominent but semantically opaque attributes. She catches the viewer in the detail, making her portraits about such cultural codes of legibility rather than the use of people as images. The sitters are in on this, with

their confident deadpan stares. It's a collusion between Opie and the sitter to do justice to the sitter as a person not able to be known merely by looking. These works demand to be read while also refusing to be fully legible. After all, as Opie has recently asked, "What is really known by anything or anybody through a portrait?"<sup>10</sup>

In other words, Opie's works often promise—but decline to deliver—the secure legibility of the iconographic detail or identifying trait. What I find subversive about Opie's photographs is her allowance for her subjects to refuse total transparency despite their ostensible exposure. No matter how much she reveals about her sitter, there is also an undertow of resistance in which she maintains the inscrutability and privacy of the subjects she purports to capture. This can help explain, for instance, why one of Opie's recurring sitters—*Idexa*—failed to recognize her personality in Opie's first portrait of her (see fig. 13).<sup>11</sup> I think one of the most successful things about Opie's photographs is their way of using the iconographic detail—the readable sign—as a snare of vexed legibility. That is, Opie's photographs preoccupy viewers with typologies and taxonomies. The attributes and traits—whether over-readable as in the new works, personal, or community-coded—draw focus and come to function as screens that induce viewers to

10. Opie and Tantemsapya 2013, n.p.

11. Opie and Reilly, 2001, 91.

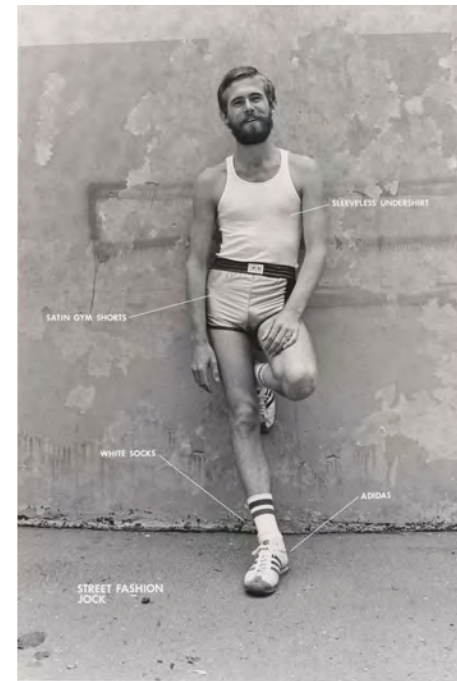


Figure 14. Hal Fischer, *Street Fashion: Jock*, 1977, from *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* (San Francisco: NFS Press, 1977). ©Hal Fischer.

attempt to see these individuals as allegories and to engage them in semantics. This is an ethical and political position. Behind the cover afforded by the distraction of these decoys, she maintains her subjects' right to exceed the image she makes of them.

The work of another photographer has continued to come to mind as I have thought about Opie's use of the attribute as decoy. In 1977 the photographer Hal Fischer published a book titled *Gay Semiotics*.<sup>12</sup> This purported to be a structuralist and quasi-anthropological study of gay men's visual codes (see fig. 14 and

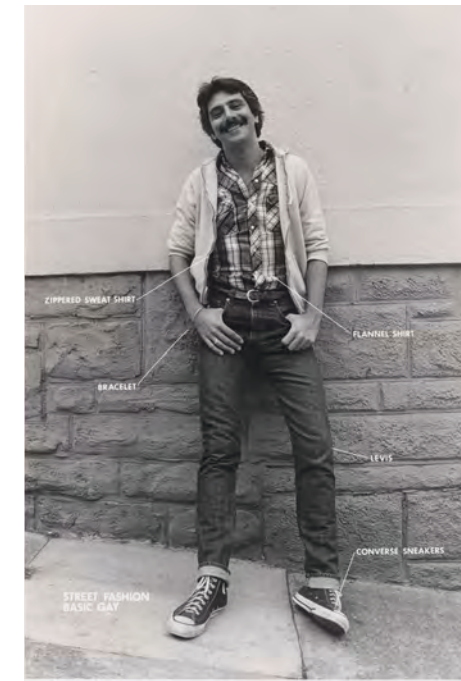


Figure 15. Hal Fischer, *Street Fashion: Basic Gay*, 1977, from *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* (San Francisco: NFS Press, 1977). ©Hal Fischer.

15). The work discussed art-historical and popular-culture visual traditions and focused on the sartorial significations of the contemporary urban gay male. Perhaps because of the book's no-nonsense tone and seeming straightforwardness, it has often been taken at face value as a simple guidebook to be used much the way an ornithologist would use a field manual. Its chronicling of well-established and commodified taxonomies of sexual and subcultural signaling could very well be employed by a new arrival to San Francisco (Fischer's case study) to orient themselves to their new possibilities.

12. Hal Fischer, *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* (San Francisco: NFS Press, 1977).



Figure 16. *Mike and Sky*, 1993, chromogenic print, 20 x 16 in.

When it is discussed in the literature, quite often Fischer's book serves as nothing more than evidence for the iconography of the hankie or the biker jacket, for instance. The book, however, is also funny, ironic, critical, and affectionate. As Jan Zita Grover remarked, "Fischer wove together a serious attempt to apply contemporary theories of signs to gay street life and a deadpan humor that poked fun at field studies, documentary photography, and the supposed truth-value of photographs."<sup>13</sup> *Gay Semiotics* is full of in-jokes and chidingly coded comments about and for its contemporary gay community. A straight reading of the text misses such moments of camp and solidarity.

The book's laying out of the semiotics of urban male homosexuality serves itself up in two ways: as ostensible, earnest documentation and as knowingly edifying and ludic subcultural discourse. Its criticality and satire work precisely because of the distraction offered by its sharp, analytic, and didactic presentation of taxonomy, typology, and iconography. The humor and camp happen because of the objective mode of presentation adopted by Fischer—not undercutting it but rather being an undercurrent within it. Importantly, Fischer's photographs are also sensitive portraits of friends and members of his local community. Looking back

on the work, he remarked, "The work was very much about my own experience—a private discourse on friends, desires, and fantasies."<sup>14</sup> These are portraits masquerading as types. The individuality and subjectivity of his sitters are safeguarded by the objective and analytic tone of his book much like the camp and the humor. For those in his community, this could be read less as a field manual than as a family album. Both intellectually sophisticated and tongue-in-cheek, Fischer's book presented a loving record of his community hidden beneath his analysis of iconography.<sup>15</sup>

From her early series to the recent allegorical work, Opie's portraits are far more subdued in their deployment of the iconographic. They use the promise of its legibility to distract from an embrace of the inscrutability of the person and from the performance of community-specific solidarity. Persons are shielded in their iconographic attributes that turn them into something else. Like the Renaissance paintings that Opie references, we see individuals as saints and characters—or, at the very least, as problems of readability (see fig. 17). Similarly, look to Opie's earlier pictures of surfers and football players, as well, for their playful twisting of stereotypes and presentation of masculinity as a precarious performance for others. Here, too, we end up talking

13. Jan Zita Grover, "The Demise of the Zippered Sweatshirt: Hal Fischer's *Gay Semiotics* (1977)," *OUT/LOOK: National Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1991): 47.

14. Quoted in *ibid.*, 46.

15. Fischer's subsequent book, *18th near Castro St. x 24* (San Francisco: NFS Press, 1978), was also a memoir of his local community in the form of a quasi-anthropological study, but it makes the personal and the subjective a more direct part of the main text.

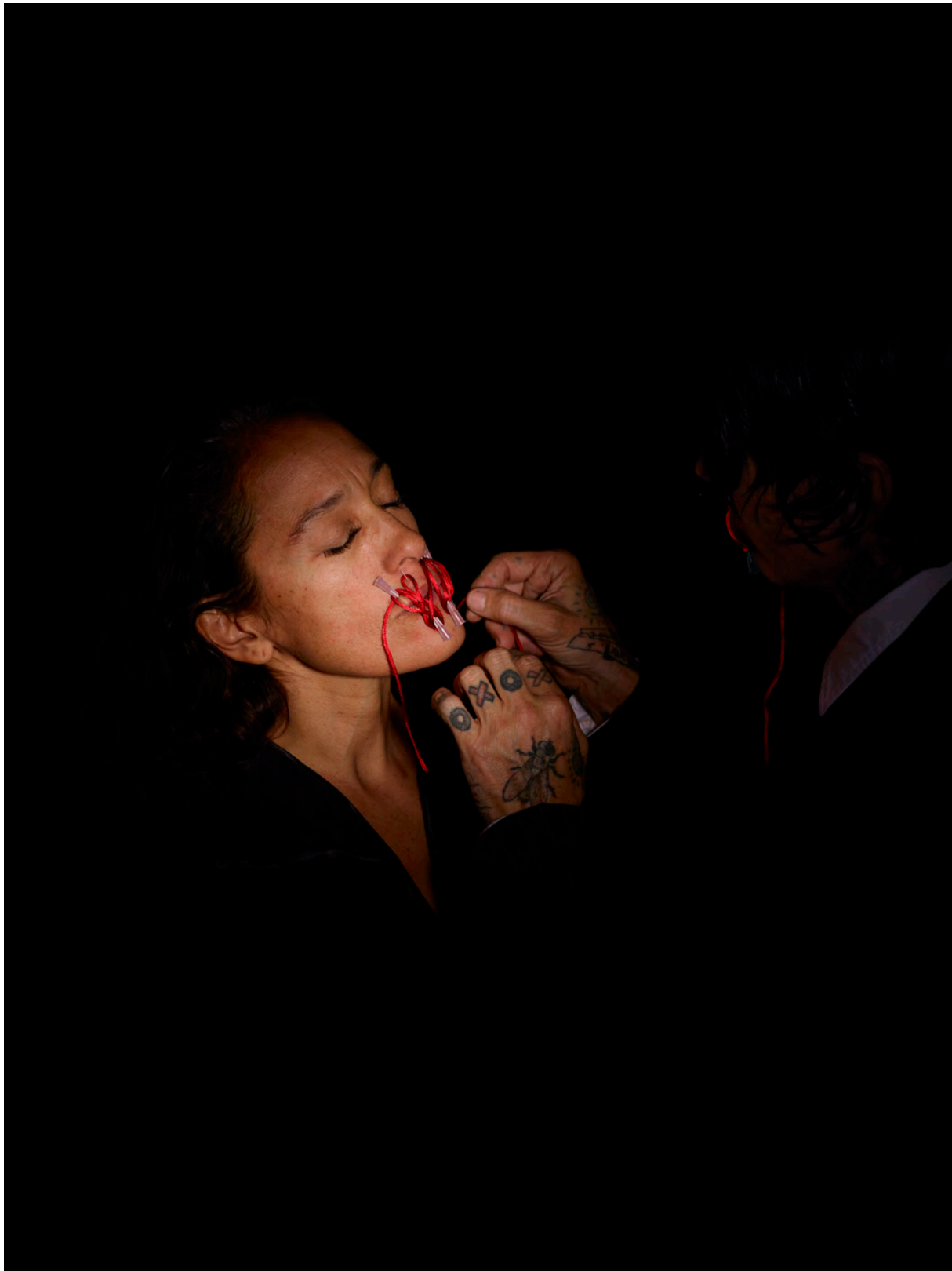


Figure 17. *Friends*, 2012, pigment print, 24 x 18 in.

about American culture and gender normativity rather than of the individual person and their complexity. Opie cares for her subjects, is sympathetic to them, and protects them by allowing them to emerge in the field of visibility afforded by the portrait while distracting the viewer's piercing gaze to such iconographic questions as the meaning of the football uniform's pads, the surfer's blond hair, or the family's display of domesticity. Opie uses this to defend and promote the individual, subtly redirecting our gaze to our own expectations and assumptions about how much we think we can know from looking at a photographic portrait.

That's ultimately what I find most compelling about Opie's photographs. They offer the lure that we might be able to understand what we are seeing—that we can *know* difference and the other subjects that have

presented themselves to us. In the end, however, the one certainty we are left with is all that we cannot know about the person, their thoughts, and their lives. Our reading of the iconographic code is always incomplete, hopelessly partial, and needing more. While they can invoke the general cultural taxonomies of identities and communities, her photographs maintain a degree of intransigence in defense of their subjects. They willfully tell us little about the persons themselves. Opie's practice of portraiture invests in this dynamic as a means to celebrate and protect the community of friends and peers she documents. Behind the decoy of the iconographic, Opie gives her sitters a place to remain opaque for themselves.

David J. Getsy is the Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Confronting  
the**

**Abje ct**



2012-13 William & Stephanie Sick  
Distinguished Professorship:  
Catherine Opie

**This book is dedicated  
to Barbara DeGenevieve.**

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