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Portrait Paradox:
Complicating Identity in Catherine Opie's *Being and Having*

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DEDICATION

For my dad, who instilled in me a lifelong love of art.

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Signification of the Phallus*, first presented in a lecture on May 9, 1958 and which is included in the 2006 English edition of *Écrits*, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes the differences between “being” and “having” the phallus, setting up binary differences in gender and sexuality.¹ The differences of being and having, simply put, are that men have [having] the phallus, whereas women are [being] the phallus, in order to “mirror” the man, affirming his own identity as the one who “has” the phallus, and thus perpetuating dichotomized and biologically based differences in gender and sexuality.² However, if women are to “be” the phallus, this would require the renunciation of women’s desires towards other women, which Lacan fails to account for.

During the 1990s, postmodern feminists and queer theorists turned to a critique of psychoanalysis to begin to deconstruct traditional visions of gender, femininity and female sexuality. Some thirty-two years after Lacan’s initial presentation, renowned queer theorist Judith Butler critiques his claims in her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, asserting that Lacan’s framework upholds “binary restrictions,” which “frame and formulate sexuality” and do not account for genders and sexualities that fall outside of this simplified construction.³ Butler argues that “Lacanian discourse centers on the notion of “a divide,” a primary or fundamental split that renders the subject internally divided and that establishes the duality of the

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 582.

² Ibid.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 55.

sexes,” therefore setting up a “failed model.”⁴ Butler and California based artist Catherine Opie’s photographic work titled *Being and Having* came out contemporaneously in the early 1990s and involved deconstructing former articulations of gender and sexuality. Butler’s critique of the terms “being” and “having” sets up a specific temporal context within which this thesis is based. And although Opie claims not to have known about Butler’s work, it is clear then that she would have at least been aware of Lacan’s assertions and chose to title her first portrait series *Being and Having* in a critique of his limiting framework, similar to that of Butler’s.⁵

Contemporary American photographer Catherine Opie’s work *Being and Having* (1991) is a series of thirteen chromogenic photographic extreme close-up portraits, resembling head-shots, of lesbian women wearing false mustaches, tattoos, and other stereotypical masculine accessories. Each 17 x 22 inch ostensible portrait is shot against a solid yellow back-drop, with the face of each sitter positioned centrally, staring into the camera. The photographs are encased by wooden frames and therefore transform the flat, photographic image into a three-dimensional object. Affixed to the bottom of each frame are metal nameplates with the sitter’s male monikers, such as, “O So Bad,” “Chief,” “Pig Pen,” “Con,” and so forth, engraved in cursive script. “Luigi,” included among the series, is an image of an androgynous woman wearing a green jester’s hat and silver-hoop earrings (Figure 1). A shallow depth of field causes her hat to become slightly blurred, as it recedes into the background. “Luigi’s” fake mustache, darker than her blonde eyebrows

⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 54 and 45.

⁵ Elisabeth Lebovici, “Destabilising Gender,” *MAKE Magazine*, September/November 2000, 19.

and hair, curls up on either end, mimicking the stereotypical image of an Italian man. The photograph is shot at such close range and high detail that we easily see the imperfections on the surface of her skin. Her somewhat forlorn, tired eyes, enhanced by the closeness of the image exposing the wrinkles underneath, lends a sense of direct engagement with the viewer. Through Opie's up-close and personal images and the diverse representation of her friends, Opie strives to make visible her own alternative queer community.

This thesis proposes that Opie's series *Being and Having* works as a visual presence on behalf of the queer community during the threshold moment of gender destabilization. In this series, Opie uses the conventional genre of portraiture to present alternatives to gender, ultimately promoting a protean understanding of identity.⁶ Furthering the notion of multifaceted identities, Opie utilizes several referents as her model for *Being and Having*; she refers to stereotyped lesbian appearance, gay male clone culture and the hyper-masculine, working-class latino, all of which are coherently represented in the series.⁷ Primarily, Opie expands the ways we understand and visualize lesbian identity as she simultaneously disrupts typological and quasi-anthropological traditions of documenting the sexually deviant other.⁸ Moreover, although lesbians

⁶ What I intend when I use the terms "conventional," "traditional," or "historical" in reference to portraiture is the idea that the portrait has generally been understood to be a mimetic likeness of the sitter, capable of representing the inner character or an inherent truth of the individual, coupled with the presumption that the sitter was someone who was worthy of representation, whether through wealth, lineage, etc. I will refer to these "conventional" ideas about portraiture throughout the thesis.

⁷ The gay male "clone" culture of the 1980s was a mimicry of heterosexual, working-class, virile masculinity in order to enact a collective visibility, which was also a sexualized image. The most important element of the look was the obligatory mustache.

⁸ In this thesis, I do not delve into anthropological photography of the "other," although there is a long history.

remained at less risk, Opie underscores the importance of the queer community's visibility at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Opie challenges the art historical canon through the appropriation of portraiture, by literally implanting her self-portrait into the series, despite being a marginalized subject herself.

In this thesis, I seek to (1) demonstrate that Opie's use of color works to complicate notions of gender; (2) show that Opie's repetitious images work against the conventional understanding that portraits depict uniqueness; (3) assert that Opie's "self-portrait" as "Bo" transgresses traditional perceptions of identity; (4) point out that Opie's apparent parody and utilization of humor serve to critique and challenge gender binaries, as well as affirm and transgress the portrait genre; (5) and finally, highlight the paradoxes in Opie's use of portraits which, particularly when viewed in the context of AIDS, work as traditional devices to connect past and present, lessening distance between sitter and viewer in a sort of memorialization, while many other aspects of *Being and Having* eschew the more traditional role of the portrait. Both embracing and pushing against the portrait tradition, Opie turns what we assume about portraiture on its head while effectively historicizing the contemporary portrait. In 1994 Opie claims "I've never seen portraits like this before that are so loving of the leather community, even though it's existed for a really long time," proving her work to be novel and unique.⁹

Situating herself within the historic genre of portraiture, Opie asserts that "The early portraits of my friends is because of Hans Holbein," and borrows Holbein's portrait

⁹ Kristine McKenna, "Welcome to Opie's World," *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1994.

motifs.¹⁰ Pointedly affected by the Northern Renaissance painter, Opie saw the genre of portraiture as an effective tool to draw attention to her marginalized queer community. Portraits created during the Renaissance were not thought of simply as paintings, but were seen as objects of veneration capable of carrying an eternalizing, lifelike quality of the sitter. As art historian Joanna Woodall argues in “Introduction: Facing the Subject,” an individual’s portrait acted as a direct substitute for the sitter it portrayed.¹¹ Indeed, portraits were literally thought of as stand-ins for the individual depicted.

The portrait has traditionally been believed to represent the essential character of the sitter, as if looking into the individual’s internal being. The ultimate goal of the portrait was to make the lifelikeness and exactitude as striking as possible, so as to create a feeling of presence of the individual depicted. In his book *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*, Harry Berger argues that early modern portraiture had to be interpreted, because of the practical purposes of the portrait, as literal and as “unmediated realism.”¹² More recently, since the advent of the camera, photographs have added to this perception of lifelikeness and the image’s supposed capability to capture the sitter’s inner essence. The photograph--literally an impression of light upon a surface present in a certain moment--gives the effect that the sitter is all the

¹⁰ “Catherine Opie in ‘Change,’” Public Broadcasting Service video, *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, season 6, April 14, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/watch-now/segment-catherine-opie-in-change>. Hans Holbein the Younger, to which Opie refers, was a German Renaissance painter lauded for his portraits of noblemen and women. His portraits are striking because of the solid color back-drops and unique attention to detail and individuality of each of the sitters he painted. Opie adopts the use of solid color backdrops from Holbein.

¹¹ Joanna Woodall, “Introduction: Facing the Subject,” in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 3.

¹² Harry Berger Jr., *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 204.

more present and touchable. This apparent essentialness, captured through the literalness of the photograph, suggests truth and authenticity. However, Opie's approach challenges the photograph's supposed truthful capacity, paralleling her critique which focuses on "authentic" gender identity. Opie asks what we can truly learn from the outer appearance of a person, questioning the portrait's conventionally conceived ability to convey authenticity and character of the sitter.

The formal portrait has historically been understood as an honorific gesture, a symbol of prestige, wealth and power for both public and private purposes. For instance, portraits of rulers and the wealthy were used publicly as propaganda to enforce power and political agendas. In "Sovereign Bodies: The Reality of Status in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Portraiture," Woodall argues that there was an exclusivity in Netherlandish painted portraiture. This aggrandizement was not limited to the Netherlands, however, as most of Europe perpetuated the notion that only certain individuals were worthy of the immortalization of portraiture.¹³ Thus, the Western portrait has carried with it a certain prestige, one which Opie now affords to her marginalized subculture, typically subjects whom the majority of society avoids talking about or looking at, revealing a deliberate discrepancy between the sitters and the genre of portraiture.

The traditional, lifelike portraits of social elites publicly affirmed importance and Opie uses this genre as a tool to gain acknowledgement for a certain alternative lesbian subculture. Opie's alignment with the portrait tradition connects the disenfranchised sitter

¹³ Joanna Woodall, "Sovereign Bodies: The Reality of Status in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 77.

with a certain worthiness of attention, taking advantage of the elitist associations that are elicited when viewing formal portraiture. As art historian Richard Brilliant argues, “portraits establish the conditions and circumstances of the viewer’s gaze; they shape the psychological process that implicates the viewer.”¹⁴ Western society affiliates prestige with formal portraiture, whether painted or photographed, therefore the portrait inherently arouses an emulative response from the viewer.

Painted portraits from the early modern era were meant to capture a mimetic resemblance of the sitter being depicted which was in part motivated by the knowledge that the individual would at some point be absent from the viewer, whether through distance or death. Thus, the portrait works in the time of death as a memorialization of the deceased, provoking a sense of presence and remembrance. Moreover, the need for commemoration, out of the realization that one would eventually no longer be alive, first materialized as the death mask from which early modern portraiture was taken.¹⁵ These historic meanings are especially relevant when considering Opie’s portraits during the AIDS crisis.

Portraits read as narratives of the time in which they were produced. Opie’s portraits chronicle societal issues in the late 1980s and early 1990s which addressed identity politics and involved questions of gender, sexuality and identity, largely prompted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Working as both a documentary and queer photographer, and fueled by a sense of loss, Opie may well have felt it incumbent upon

¹⁴ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 141.

¹⁵ Berger, *Fictions of the Pose*, 508.

her to document this underrepresented community. Since the portrait has been suggested to have the ability to affect emotions of the viewer, presentation of her marginalized community in the form of a formal portrait creates a visceral relationship between sitter and viewer, thereby increasing the potential for political engagement in the face of HIV/AIDS and the exacerbation of homophobia in the wake of the epidemic.

Because no thorough analysis of Opie's use of aesthetic devices in *Being and Having* has been carried out, this thesis will take into consideration two major aspects of the formal attributes of the series: color and repetition. Furthermore, this thesis examines how Opie's work is not entirely somber, as others argue her portraits to be, but rather can be understood as parodic. Opie's parody of the portrait genre affirms its target as authoritative, but also inserts new subjects into the traditional modes of portraiture, thus setting up a paradox. I propose that Opie's inclusion of herself in this subculture works, in part, to expand upon traditional documentary photography and notions of identity. Finally, since no substantial writing has considered the significance of Opie's use of portraiture during the time of AIDS, I will introduce some interpretations of the role of portraiture during this dire period for the queer community.

This thesis relies on theoretical readings of color, such as contemporary artist David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*, to establish a basis for understanding Opie's color use as a way to further complicate gender identity. I also take into account Holbein's use of color backgrounds as central to influencing Opie's portraits. In addition, Gérard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* and his influential writings on parody serve to inform my definitions of parody in the context of *Being and Having*.

Speaking of Butler's ground breaking work titled, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Opie claims, "I wasn't aware of her work when I was making *Being and Having*. I think there were so many people looking at issues of gender at that time; it was a huge explosion in both the art world and academia, which was a direct reflection of what was happening in the community."¹⁶ Indeed, critics and historians have compared Opie's series *Being and Having* with Butler's ideas surrounding the performativity of gender, which I also touch upon throughout this thesis. Lastly, this thesis introduces texts by art historian and AIDS activist Douglas Crimp as a basis for interpreting art-making during the time of HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Using these sources, this thesis will demonstrate how Opie's work is related to postmodern gender discourse, providing a fluid model of identity, as it simultaneously pushes against and embraces the historic genre of portraiture.

This thesis relies on numerous primary sources, such as early and recent newspaper reviews, documentaries and interviews with Opie, to increase my knowledge about general interpretations of her work and serve as a foundation upon which this thesis expands. These texts also serve as counterarguments to my own, illuminating other interpretations of her art. These texts inform my understanding of Opie's work in contexts that may parallel those arguments in some instances, but they also differ from those typically written about Opie's work.

This thesis employs formal analysis of Opie's *Being and Having*, interpreting the series as a way of complicating gender and highlighting Opie's role in the subculture she

¹⁶ Lebovici, "Destabilising Gender," 19.

documents. I hope to underscore the importance of Opie's aesthetics and how specific qualities of her images work to challenge notions of identity. Because of Opie's attention to the precision of the photograph, it is essential for interpretations of her work to acknowledge her focus on formal qualities. Additionally, this thesis applies historical approaches that consider the social context of *Being and Having*, especially in regards to postmodern gender and identity discourses and the impact of HIV/AIDS on queer communities. It is also important to note that although Opie herself underscores the importance of her portraits in the context of AIDS, this has not received formal discussion.

CHAPTER 1: COMPLICATIONS of IDENTITY

Catherine Opie came to be known in the art world with her first solo exhibition, titled *Being and Having*, at Gallery 494 in New York City on November 14, 1991 (Figure 2).¹⁷ Art writer David Hirsch explains, “Many of the women in these 14 type-C prints are involved in a relatively recent gender-bender phenomenon called “Daddy Boy” in which they take on the mustached gay-dude look.”¹⁸ *Being and Having* is a conceptual documentation of lesbians, many of whom take part in the daddy/boy sadomasochist (S&M) subculture, one in which women model their sexual relationships on those of gay male couples who play with sexual authority.¹⁹ In 1991, Opie explains, “Daddy Boy, for me, is not about completely identifying as males. It’s about pushing the boundaries of gender. It was a way of saying, we’re not going to negotiate, we’re going to just do it. Let’s forget about our gender as female and play for a few hours or a couple of days.”²⁰

Opie describes the outset of the project, stating, “I started last December [1990] with this image in my head of women with mustaches on. I had four friends come over one night, and after seeing the resulting photographs I worked on it for the next eight

¹⁷ Anna Marie Smith, “The Feminine Gaze: Photographer Catherine Opie Documents a Lesbian Daddy/Boy Subculture,” *The Advocate*, November 19, 1991, Issue 590, 82. *Being and Having* was shown in a group exhibition titled “Someone or Somebody” in May and June of 1991 in Los Angeles, which was the series’ initial debut.

¹⁸ David Hirsch, “The Artist’s Roles: Catherine Opie,” *New York Native*, December 2, 1991, Issue 450. Hirsch mentions here, as does Anna Marie Smith in “The Feminine Gaze,” that there are 14 prints, rather than 13, however through my research, I have found that all other references state that there are 13 and I have found only 13 images from the series.

¹⁹ Orna Guralnik, “Being and Having an Identity: Catherine Opie,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 14 (2013): 241. Sadomasochism is the practice of giving or receiving pleasure, often times as a sexual stimulant, in the form of pain or humiliation.

²⁰ Hirsch, “The Artist’s Roles: Catherine Opie.”

months.”²¹ This series of thirteen severely cropped portraits shows Opie’s community of lesbian friends in the alternative club scene decked out in elaborate macho facial hair. The most social body part, the face, highlighted by the extreme cropping, communicates the subjects’ constructed gender, as several seem to cock their heads in what we may interpret as stereotypical masculine bravado. The portraits are highly controlled, staged and theatrical, exposing even the netting of the fake mustaches. The photographs are 17 x 22 inches, a bit larger than life scale, adding a certain hyper-presence to the photographs because of the closeness to the face and intense cropping, lending them a looming presence. These chromogenic prints have a slight horizontal orientation, and when installed at eye level, provoke a linear read, emphasizing their communal aspect. What is intriguing about this series is the tension between singularity and seriality; each sitter immediately relates to one another, highlighting the community, yet are noticeably individualized with distinct attributes, different races and various colors, shapes and sizes of the mustaches.²²

The color background is a most engaging aspect of the image. Each portrait is backed by a solid, bright yellow grounding, creating a sense of flatness. This spatial ambiguity is echoed by the gender ambiguity of the sitters themselves, and heightened by the absence of the sitters’ bodies. Indeed, part of their mysterious aura is what is excluded from the frame, most notably, their bodies. In these intimate, close-up portraits, Opie

²¹ Hirsch, “The Artist’s Roles: Catherine Opie.”

²² I discuss the idea of community and individuality within *Being and Having* in greater detail in the section “Repetition.”

pairs the classic tropes of portraiture with contemporary, provocative subject matter in order to both appeal to and startle the viewer.²³

One of the women, “Papa Bear,” is most striking (Figure 3). Wearing dark sunglasses, large hooped earrings, adorned with nose and lip piercings, she confronts the viewer. She lacks facial expression, mouth closed, as her eyes stare straight ahead, barely detectable behind the dark glass and reflection in the sunglasses. Her scruffy, full beard, tufts of eyebrows and head hair are all about the same color and from a distance we do not notice the obvious prop of her masculine attribute. After careful examination, we see glue and the mesh upon which the beard is affixed, peeling off of her chin at various points. The photograph is so closely concentrated on her face that we can see slight red blemishes, freckles and pores on the surface of her skin. Additionally, because of the intense cropping, the image cuts off just above the eyebrows leaving us with very little sense of her hair, perhaps an additional way to create gender ambiguity. As the space recedes, her ears become a bit blurry and the tops of her shoulders are, likewise, slightly out of focus, thereby becoming more three-dimensional. We can see she wears a black necklace and shirt, but they quickly disappear out of frame. The aura of the yellow background allows the sitter to pop out, drawing attention to minute details of her face.

Similarly, “Chicken” meets our gaze and her impassive expression engenders a feeling of confrontation (Figure 4). In “Chicken,” however, the image feels more flat, as the majority of what we see is highly focused; the minimal amount of blurring and the

²³ The classic tropes of portraiture, which are echoed in Opie’s portraits, are the focus of the individualizing qualities of the face, the construction of a personal selfhood as is most notably emphasized by their names, and especially in traditional formal portrait photography, a minimal, plain background.

fact that her face and the yellow background seem to be on the same plane offer a painterly effect. “Chicken” is endowed with a perfectly manicured black mustache and frayed goatee, nearly matching the black of her eyebrows and hair. We see that her head is shaved, heightening the gender ambiguity. What is most unique about “Chicken” is her teardrop “tattoo,” just below the outside edge of her left eye, alluding to gang association. She cocks her eyebrow somewhat, suggesting inquisitiveness, cockiness or arrogance. Again, the photograph is at such close range that we see freckles, pores and individual hairs surrounding her face. The photograph discloses very little additional information; all we are left with are the sides of her neck, the slightest hint of a tee-shirt and the image abruptly ends, cut off by the frame.

“Chief” is perhaps the most ridiculous and ambiguous of the bunch (Figure 5). “Chief” engages the viewer with her large, glossy eyes. She wears a blue bandana that wraps around her forehead, again suggesting a gang reference, as her parted lips barely hold onto a lit cigarette. The end of the bandana flares out behind her head and mimics the down-turned shape of her mustache. The bandana covers the tops of her ears, pressing them against the sides of her head. We therefore lose the sense of spatial depth as we saw in “Papa Bear,” for example, because the receding blurriness is not as apparent. Her mustache matches her eyebrows and skin tone, yet we immediately grow suspect as the mustache is, again, perfectly coiffed and appears not to be growing from her skin, but rather resting on top. The tops of her shoulders are visible and we see she wears a white tee shirt, complimenting the white patterned motif of the bandana.

Opie's interest in adding the nameplates is telling and marks the uniqueness of each of the women's alternative male constructions. As Brilliant argues, "identity and naming are inextricably bound together in the art of portraiture."²⁴ In *Being and Having* Opie employs nameplates in order to affirm each individual: "Chicken," "Papa Bear," "Con," "Ingin," "Luigi," "O So Bad," "Whitey," "Chief," "Jake," "Wolfe," "J," "Pig Pen," and the artist herself as "Bo." Notably, Opie only adds the nameplates in *Being and Having* underscoring the questions surrounding identity made explicit in this series. As well as the obvious communal aspect, there is, no doubt, an equal emphasis on the singularity of the sitters, as is most accentuated by the naming. Their names confer dignity and single the sitters out as extraordinary. The nameplates imply that the sitters are important enough for the audience to attend to each of them personally.

First and foremost, Opie meticulously crafts the quality and perfection of the photograph; layers of conceptual information come after this initial formalistic allure. In a general reference to her concern for the aesthetics of her portraits, in 1994 Opie claims, "When I first started making work I tailored it for the heterosexual community because I was terrified I'd never have a career if I didn't."²⁵ This "tailoring" is demonstrated in the stately refinement of the photographs themselves. Opie uses a precise, familiar language--that of formal portraiture--to seduce the viewer into a faux-serious confrontation with the sitter, and it is Opie's formalist strategies and techniques that make her portraits strikingly beautiful and available to the "heterosexual community." Opie employs two

²⁴ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 64.

²⁵ McKenna, "Welcome to Opie's World."

standout aesthetic techniques which make *Being and Having* all the more complex and powerful: the use of color and repetition. A mixture of documentary and conceptual photography, this series is a complex comment, at once personal and political, on the artifice of gender, the social constructions of power and questions surrounding individual identities and constructions of community.

COLOR

Modern photographer William Eggleston “dragged color, kicking and screaming, into the world of art photography.”²⁶ Before Eggleston, color in “true” art photography was seen to be trivial and puerile, deemed as easily accomplished, extraneous, lacking focus on forms and ultimately, unacceptable. However, it is through his use of color that Eggleston became one of the most recognized and accomplished fine art photographers of the twentieth century. In 1976 at the Museum of Modern Art, John Szarkowski curated the first solo exhibition of color photographs by the unknown Eggleston, titled “William Eggleston’s Guide.” The exhibition was immediately criticized for being banal, boring, unspectacular and random; the photographs were deemed as images that anyone else would be capable of producing (Figure 6).²⁷ The bourgeois mentality with which black and white fine art photography had been attached was finally upset and challenged by Eggleston.

Eggleston, a self-taught photographer, began photographing in black and white. He chose everyday, commonplace and familiar subject matter, shooting in a manner

²⁶ Reiner Holzeimer and Jack Cocker, *The Colourful Mr. Eggleston*, directed by Reiner Holzeimer and Jack Cocker (London: BBC, 2009).

²⁷ Michael Almereyda, *William Eggleston in the Real World*, directed by Michael Almereyda (New York City: Palm Pictures, 2005).

much like the tradition of street photography, with a certain “snapshot aesthetic,” similar to those of Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand. Indeed, Eggleston’s interest was in the intersection between life and art.²⁸ However, Eggleston soon came to realize that a monochrome rendering of life was not sufficient to capture it: the world exists in color and therefore it was imperative for Eggleston to capture life in exact representational pigments. In the mid-1960s, Eggleston changed the course of photography by shooting his first roll of color film.²⁹ He was the first fine art photographer to use a dye transfer printing process, which was used for advertisements because of the clarity and saturation of color and continues to use this medium to this day. Breaking with the use of black and white in documentary and street photography traditions, Eggleston, like Opie, is known for extraordinary use of color. Critics of both artists assert that if it was not for their color, they would be boring, unexceptional images, however, these critics undermine their own arguments; for it is precisely their use of color that makes these photographers outstanding.

In a 2006 review, curator Klaus Ottman compliments Opie’s use of color; “She’s such a superb colourist, which is very rare these days.”³⁰ Indeed, the stunning use of color in Opie’s work is mentioned in nearly every description, account, or review of her portraits, but is not considered at length. As I will argue, what distinguishes Opie is her portrait practice, particularly recognizable by her signature style of distinct, bright colors. In *Being and Having*, each individual is positioned against a bright yellow, solid plane.

²⁸ Holzeimer, *The Colourful Mr. Eggleston*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jean Dykstra, “Road Trip,” *ArtReview*, June 2006, 41.

Descriptions of this color have ranged from “mustard yellow,” “startling yellow,” “brilliant yellow,” “luminous color,” “synthetic, hyped-up colors,” and “technicolor,” “lusciously colored,” “baroque color,” and finally, “screaming, caution-yellow.”³¹ In 2001, Opie herself asserts “lushness in the color is important.”³² Why has this aspect of Opie’s work been so glossed over if, clearly, it is one of the most unique and crucial aesthetic aspects of her work? I will offer some methods of interpretation and expand on the complexities of Opie’s color.

Certain contexts change the way we interpret colors, so how do we perceive Opie’s yellow? In *Being and Having*, we understand the context of early 1990s queer culture as a clue which informs how we may interpret her color use. Opie’s use of yellow helps the sitters escape from gender coded alienation associated with certain colors. Within this queer context, we would have different presumptions if the sitters were situated against pink or blue backdrops. Instead, the use of yellow frees and causes further ambiguity in the sitters and ultimately breaks down distinctions of gender. Moreover, this peculiar bright color yellow is gaudy, decorative, and what we might consider a “bad” choice, being particularly harsh as a backdrop for the sitters’ faces.

³¹ Citations for these descriptions are listed respectively: Jean Dykstra, “Opie: The Community of Difference,” *Art in America*, December 2008, 132. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 33. Jennifer Blessing et al., *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008), 42. Harmony Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 152. Michael Kimmelman, “Catherine Opie,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1996. Susan Kandel, “‘Invitational’s’ Controlling Personas,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1993, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-10-14/entertainment/ca-45414_1_folk-art. Susan Kandel, “Exterior Designs,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1996. Christopher Knight, “Sitting Pretty: ‘American Photographer’ Gives a Full Portrait of Catherine Opie,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 2008.

³² Maura Reilly, “The Drive to Describe: an Interview with Catherine Opie,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2001):84.

In *Color in Art*, John Gage writes, referring to the difficulties of interpreting color, “It is sometimes said, especially by artists, that colour cannot be described or discussed in words.”³³ This, in part, explains why Opie’s color is nearly always mentioned, but never considered. It is certainly true that language falls short for descriptions of color, but this does not mean that it does not merit critical attention. In the case of Opie’s portraits, it is essential to understand color as being a part of her postmodern, queer aesthetic and as a mode employed for gaining recognition as a unique portrait photographer. Furthermore, Opie breaks free from traditional documentary and conceptual aesthetics, as well as the tradition of modernist black and white portraiture such as those of Edward Weston and Richard Avedon.

Avedon, for instance, took portraits of people the rest of society has been likely to overlook in his series *In The American West* (1979-1984) (Figure 7). Like others before him, such as Diane Arbus and Dorothea Lange, he captured images of “drifters, loners, ordinary working people,” all of whom are positioned against solid white backgrounds, which heighten the severity, sensationalism and apparent isolation of these people.³⁴ Avedon started out photographing for the commercial industry and by the 1950s was a well-known fashion photographer shooting for Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue, most often producing work in color. However, after decades of working for the fashion industry, Avedon switched gears to become specifically an art photographer, signifying his explicit position as artist through the use of black and white, leaving color in the commercial

³³ John Gage, *Color in Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2006), 9.

³⁴ *American Masters: Richard Avedon: Darkness and Light*, directed by Helen Whitney (Public Broadcasting Service, 1995).

arena. It is this tradition of colorless, formal portrait photography that Opie works simultaneously within and against as she combines painterly and photographic traditions.

Queer theory emerged in the postmodern age when the status of fine art was being questioned and artists were employing more decorative aspects of art. Lesbian artist Harmony Hammond explains, “feminism was absorbed as one of many postmodern strategies used to disrupt the modernist project of purity and universality.”³⁵ Similarly, Opie’s postmodern aesthetic and position as lesbian feminist deconstructs modernist purity by utilizing ostentatious, gaudy colors. However, the monochromatic background was common in Renaissance portraiture and could also be understood as yet another art historical reference, upon which Opie is so keen to rely. Furthermore, the solid, Holbeinesque backdrop serves to link the queer community to the high art of traditional portraiture, inserting the marginalized subject into the privileged genre of the portrait.³⁶

Representations of gender and sexual marginalization in portraiture have been depicted in black and white photography by numerous twentieth century artists such as Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe and Claude Cahun. The color in *Being and Having* lends a buoyant and whimsical effect as opposed to Opie’s precursors who used black and white photographs to create more somber, serious renditions of their gay or lesbian subjects. For instance, photographs by Arbus capture peculiar, overlooked, and often times sexually deviant segments of our society (Figure 8). Arbus’s use of black and white adds a severe overtone and creates a sense of temporal distance between viewer and

³⁵ Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America*, 51.

³⁶ The term “Holbeinesque” refers to portraitist Hans Holbein’s influence on Opie’s portraits; namely that the background of the portraits are solid planes of color.

subject, differing from the approach Opie takes towards marginalized representation which, through the use of color, suggests a present day perception. Moreover, Opie asserts “I used to like the work of Dorothea Lange and Hilla and Bernd Becher . . . I now find the realism of documentary imagery very limiting, and I’m trying to find new ways to get my message across.”³⁷ Opie exemplifies this freedom through the use of color so as not to limit her aesthetic range as a so-called documentary photographer, perhaps finding that strict black and white photography restricted the scope of her creativity. By employing bright colors, Opie became identifiable through expanding her unique documentary and conceptual approach to depicting the sexually marginalized.

Photographer Robert Mapplethorpe was the first to take pictures of the gay male community and aestheticized the homoerotic body. Known for his black and white, highly finished and formulaic portraits, Mapplethorpe became notorious for his explicit documentation of homosexual male S&M practices. In his portraits, Mapplethorpe, like Opie, did not believe in presenting an essentialness or inner character of the sitter, and instead realized the theatricality and falsity of superficial appearances. Examples of Mapplethorpe’s play and understanding of the multiple layers of human character and the seriality of identity can be seen in his performative self-portraits. For example, Mapplethorpe presents himself as a faun, a woman, a macho-man and as death itself (Figure 9). Shooting on wholly neutral backgrounds of black, white or gray, Mapplethorpe emphasized the elegant forms of his subject matter, more often than not

³⁷ Smith, “The Feminine Gaze,” 82.

focusing on the curves of the nude male body and the play of light on surfaces.³⁸

Mapplethorpe employed light filters and diffusers to make more flattering images of his sitters, with less definition of details and flaws on the face, whereas Opie's use of color tends to highlight the imperfections. Both Mapplethorpe and Opie are rooted in formalism, rely on solid backdrops, which decontextualize the sitter, and blur the boundaries between traditional formal portraits and subcultural representation.

Feminist art curator Maura Reilly states, "I think of Mapplethorpe as being the first to aestheticize the gay male community. I think of you as being the first artist to aestheticize not only the gay male community, but the lesbian and transgender ones, as well," validating a specifically queer approach towards sexual representation.³⁹ Opie herself affirms that "'Being and Having' was one of the first queer series that I did," thereby labeling her work as queer which highlights the association of color with queerness.⁴⁰

Where there is an absence of human subjects, however, Opie does work in black and white, focusing on architectural elements and physical structures within communities. For instance, Opie's *Freeway* series (1994-1995) gives the impression of archeological evidence, or ancient ruins, and evokes a feeling of abandonment and time passed (Figure 10). *Freeway*, a series of forty 2 1/4 x 6 3/4 inch matte platinum prints, is created at a much smaller scale and generates a meditative mood. Additionally, Opie's

³⁸ Steven Nash, Gordon Baldwin and Daniell Cornell, *Robert Mapplethorpe: Portraits* (Palm Springs: Palm Springs Art Museum, 2009), 17-18.

³⁹ Reilly, "The Drive to Describe," 85.

⁴⁰ Lebovici, "Destabilising Gender," 18.

continuous body of work, *American Cities* (1997-present), documents constructions of communities through panoramic, glossy black and white IRIS Print photographs, also devoid of human figures (Figure 11). By contrast, Opie's portraits and photographs with figures are saturated with color, aestheticizing contemporary human experience and underscoring the relationship between art and life, which recall the ideas of Eggleston. Through the use of color, *Being and Having* seems to be much more about present day identity issues, rather than being used as quasi-anthropological evidence of a time passed.

Holland Cotter writes that Opie's portraits would be unremarkable were it not for the "elaborate cosmetic adornments," and while he is directly referencing the sitters' tattoos and piercings, this adornment is echoed in the showy, dramatic color backdrops, which make the images striking.⁴¹ In other criticisms, there is a consensus that Opie's work would look very plain and not nearly as impressive were it not for the use of color backdrops heightened by the tattooed sitters. It is precisely this quality of color in her photographs that brought her portraits to recognition and prominence in the 1990s. Opie's strategic, attention-grabbing color works to appeal to those beyond her circumscribed queer community and opens up to mainstream consideration. Furthermore, the color creates the ability to consider her more challenging images: they are immediately arresting and beautifully crafted.

The color rejects place, effectively leaving the sitters with no narrative context and lends to the photographs a conceptual feel: they seem to be in a fantastical, queer, no-man's-land. The meretricious color and the apparent non-place highlight the artificialness

⁴¹ Holland Cotter, "Catherine Opie," *New York Times*, April 14, 1995.

of the sitters in all of their theatrical glory. In 1996, the chief art critic at the New York Times, Michael Kimmelman wrote in regards to the portraits that, “their synthetic, hyped up colors give to them an unreality, like 1950s technicolor movies.”⁴² Indeed, the “unreality” of the yellow color, contrasted with the sitter’s sensual skin tones and facial details, creates a compelling paradox between construction and reality.

Further confirming her involvement in the tradition of documentary photography, Opie describes the influence documentary photographer August Sander has had on the production of her portraits. Sander, a German photographer, took portraits of people in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century, documenting different “types” of people, thereby categorizing them (Figure 12). The photographs comprising Sander’s portrait project, *People of the Twentieth Century*, are compelling because Sander categorized individuals based on profession and social class, such as The Farmer, The Woman, The Artist, and The Last People, which included the so-called sick and insane, sometimes photographing them within their surroundings. Opie, on the other hand, expands upon Sander’s typological tradition by photographing her parodic lesbian and gay male “types” inside a formal photographic studio setting. Opie declares, “My portraits are hugely influenced by Sander’s typology . . . But I also want them to move toward a more traditional, formal portrait motif. That’s where Holbein comes in. He’s the influence behind the color and the gaze, too.”⁴³ A compelling aspect of Opie’s work is the tension between the formal portrait and the suggestion of a typological framework;

⁴² Kimmelman, “Catherine Opie.”

⁴³ Reilly, “The Drive to Describe,” 90.

she critiques the way in which society stereotypes certain groups of people, presenting the critique through portraiture.

Referring to the use of formalism combined with color, Opie reveals, “When I started that and used Holbein back in the ‘90s, that wasn’t being done in terms of portraiture.”⁴⁴ Opie’s photographs do indeed seem to relate to the qualities of oil painting; they are detailed, precise images with a complete saturation of color. Furthermore, the photographs are glossy and recall the sheen of oil paint; Opie seems to paint with photography. She appropriates and complicates the traditions of painted portraiture and typological documentary photography showing the lesbian woman, dressed as a homosexual man, gazing back at the viewer, satisfied by their own agency. Opie typifies her sitters, harkening back to the influential work of Sander and Holbein in a playful homage to documentary photography and the painted portrait.

In *Being and Having*, Opie’s avoidance of colors such as pink, purple or blue that are often associated with gender, causes ambiguity. At the same time, color in general has historically been deemed feminine, which Opie challenges by posing as her male-alter ego, completely complicating gender binaries. In Woodall’s introduction to *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, she explains that nineteenth-century portraiture became more and more gendered masculine and feminine, which in large part was enforced by the use of color in painting. For instance, Woodall explains that black, white and neutral were deemed as appropriate colors for depictions of men because it reflected the authoritative masculine role, whereas the “shimmering colour” in portraiture was “restricted to images

⁴⁴ Andrea Blanch, “Catherine Opie Interview,” *Musée Magazine*, September 24, 2013, www.museemagazine.com/art-2/features/catherine-opie-interview.

of women.”⁴⁵ Color held more importance than design in portraits of women, Woodall argues, which directly opposes the *colore* versus *disegno* debate, typically favoring line over color, thus gendering *colore* as feminine and *disegno* as masculine. Color was considered ornamental, decorative and superficial, which equated it with femininity and therefore more important for depictions of women. Thus, male and female were distinguished by use of color, and women were further pushed into the realm of the decorative. Opie complicates this tradition by decorating her “male” sitters with brilliant color and, of course, facial hair. Women have continually been encouraged by men to wear make-up, dress ostentatiously and to generally decorate their bodies.

Historically, clothing has had links to gender identity, whether it has been to hide one’s biological sex or worn in alignment within normative male and female distinctions. J.C. Flügel’s book *The Psychology of Clothes* first identified and named an event which started at the end of the eighteenth century and led to the invention of the man’s suit.⁴⁶ This phenomenon, the Great Masculine Renunciation, is a social circumstance in which men rejected dandyism, adornment, beauty and color in favor of a more rigid male dress code, further delineating between male and female appearances. This indicates a necessity for an obvious separation between men and women which became primarily articulated in forms of dress. General colorless uniformity, enforced by the wearing of suits, conveyed a trustworthiness and, more importantly, masculine control. A large part of this clothing divide, and therefore gender division, has been enhanced by use of color,

⁴⁵ Woodall, “Introduction: Facing the Subject,” 5.

⁴⁶ J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930), 110-112.

where men have since been restricted to the colorless in fear of being effeminate or interpreted as homosexual.

Similarly, the general suppression of color has been sustained in conventional western ideals, particularly in modernist art. In his book *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor argues that the purging of color has been a constant in the history of western society, including and especially within the arts. Batchelor argues, “in the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural theorists of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed.”⁴⁷ Batchelor names this apparent fear of color “chromophobia,” and explains, “colour is made out to be the property of some “foreign” body - usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological.”⁴⁸ With this understanding, we can consider Opie’s use of color as a badge of sorts, asserting herself and her community as “other” and as a way to challenge modernist ideals of purity.

Batchelor gives numerous examples in which color is equated to the feminine and the subordinated, for instance, he cites nineteenth century critic Charles Blanc as stating color should be “contained and subordinated--like a woman.”⁴⁹ Additionally, like Woodall and others before, it has been noted that the application of color has been deemed low in the hierarchy of an artist’s technique. Color is regarded as sensorial, superficial and not equated with thoughtfulness and has therefore been rejected in fine

⁴⁷ David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2000), 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 -23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

art, particularly in modernism's purist ideologies. During the upsurge of decoration in postmodern art, however, artists effectively challenged this historical *colore* versus *disegno* debate which can be seen in Opie's portraits as she conflates extreme formalism, sharp details and lines through the medium of photography with the "frivolous" use of intense color. Batchelor also quotes John Gage stating color has "regularly been linked with other better-documented sexual and racial phobias."⁵⁰ Indeed, even today it is uncommon to see men wearing brightly colored or decorative clothing. Rather, men eschew such items in an effort to preserve superficial maleness and as a defense mechanism against being interpreted as womanly.

Color, in various examples, has been a discriminatory tool used against women, and those deemed as other, as well as a mechanism for upholding and enforcing gendered distinctions. Queer theory works to break down gender dichotomies and color is an important facet in understanding these gendered distinctions, particularly in regards to Opie's work. Opie's postmodern approach towards gender identity promotes fluidity that is further exemplified in her complex use of color. By using this enigmatic yellow, Opie successfully employs a queer color element, leaving us with wholly ambiguous individuals. Opie's color undermines modernist ideals of purity, works to challenge conventional dichotomies of gender and upsets the traditions of feminizing color through the depiction of the queer women's masculine alter-egos.

⁵⁰David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 29.

REPETITION

The second particularly compelling technique Opie adopts in *Being and Having* is repetition.⁵¹ By employing the repetitive elements of color, cropping, framing, non-expressions and mustaches, Opie constructs her sitters as a collective community, thereby pushing against the standards of the unique portrait, resulting in a loss of individuality. *Being and Having* is more focused on the politics of community than it is the personal human subject, which has traditionally been the goal of the individual portrait. Furthermore, Opie makes visually apparent the potential for reproduction that is inherent in the photographic process, underscoring a loss of uniqueness versus the singular painted portrait. Opie virtually repeats the portrait thirteen times, for thirteen very similar images, intrinsically questioning the status and truth of the photographic portrait. Simultaneously capturing the differences of each individual, but also clearly visually repetitive, Opie ultimately provokes us to ask what we can truly learn from outward appearances, showing us how stereotypes are generated and how communities are formed.

In *Being and Having*, Opie is less concerned for the depiction of the unique individual and more concerned for the communal signification established through the repetitive use of visual motifs. As individuals comprise a community, Opie's separate sitters make up the series. The 17 x 22 inch dimensions of the images are not conventional portrait orientation, and when installed horizontally, as is typically the case, strengthen the sense of communality and underscore the repetitive style of the series. In

⁵¹ Within this section, I refer to seriality as the series of photographs that belong to the whole of *Being and Having*. This is distinct from what I suggest by the term repetition, which I use referring to the repeated qualities of each photograph (the mustache, the close cropping, the similar lack of expression and the yellow background).

the 1996 exhibition catalog *Catherine Opie: The Photographers' Gallery, London*, Russell Ferguson interviews Opie, asking first, "When you began making portraits, were you consciously setting out to represent a community rather than individual people?" In response Opie answers, "Yeah, I thought of it as a community."⁵² In the interview, Opie continues by explaining that she always works in series, meaning her work is informed by seriality and relationships between multiple images, deeming them representative of a community; she is less interested in the single shot versus the body of work. The series *Being and Having* documents a certain lesbian subcultural community and Opie resolutely shapes her own identity through this community. The series illuminates Opie's understanding of how individuals are simultaneously bound by communities and suggests how they may be excluded.

Postmodernism is largely connected with repetition in relation to questions surrounding authenticity and uniqueness.⁵³ Similarly, the authenticity of gender is repeatedly questioned and parodied by Opie in *Being and Having* as she exaggerates the culturally constructed nature of gender. The repetitive nature of the series parallels Butler's argument that gender is simulacrum, a copy with no original, that perpetually and inorganically repeats itself. In queer theory, gender is deciphered as an enforced cultural performance which is repeated daily to uphold conventional standards of gender dichotomies. In her catalog exhibition for the show *Pervert*, curator Catherine Lord cites Butler as arguing that:

⁵² Russell Ferguson, Joshua Decter and Kate Bush, *Catherine Opie: The Photographers' Gallery, London* (London: Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 44.

⁵³ Postmodern artists such as Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine and Andy Warhol worked with questions of authenticity explicitly represented through appropriation and repetition of preexisting images.

Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. Indeed, in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality...⁵⁴

According to queer theory, gender and heterosexuality are not inherently biological, but rather are understood as “repetition[s] of socially established meanings.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, the power that holds these social meanings in place is asserted over time through repetitious acts of control. Opie parodies these repetitious acts of gender performance to promote social change, to critique stereotypes and to enact a certain reversal of power for the queer community. Additionally, Butler argues that a repeated sexuality constitutes the declaration of sexual orientations. This construct is echoed in *Being and Having*, in which the series provides representations of the S&M lesbian community. The continuity and coherence of behavioral repetitions results in the formation of the individual self and community as visualized by *Being and Having*. Opie exemplifies the structure of the community based on a commonality of repeated sexual desires among the women.

Opie’s repetitive series depicts generalized representations of subjects who have similar experiences of neglect, marginalization and stereotyping. The strategic use of seriality in *Being and Having* again recalls the work of Sander because of the typological quality. Opie has provided a similar, but contemporary and parodic categorization of lesbian and male appearances and sexualities. The categorical quality in Sander’s

⁵⁴ Catherine Lord, *Pervert* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995), 8.

⁵⁵ Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: sexual politics, social change and the power of the performative* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 26.

portraits is analogous to Opie's conflation of stereotyped male and lesbian "types" in *Being and Having*.

Similarly, in 1986 photographer Thomas Ruff began taking gigantic color portraits of subjects that are seemingly quite ordinary and which "convey a general impression of a lack of identity."⁵⁶ Their apparent loss of individuality is heightened by the seriality of the images, each backed by a solid white background (Figure 13). The sitters stare frontally, lacking emotion or expression and recall passport photographs. Ironically, some of the sitters do not have names associated with them, adding to the loss of individuality and are identifiable by their faces alone, playing with the illusion of identity. Following in the footsteps of Bernd and Hilla Becher with whom he worked, Ruff uses the seriality of the project to make the sitters generalized and anonymous, much like the Becher's series of photographs of industrial buildings and structures. Ruff's portraits are not meant to elevate the person in the portrait, but rather to make them generic types in order to draw out the similarities and common qualities each one embodies.

Social hierarchy between the subjects in *Being and Having* is not established and, contrary to Sander, Opie does not categorize her sitters based on social status or occupation. As emphasized by the nearly identical posture, pose and frame, all of the sitters here are equals, each proportionately worthy of our attention. However, the leveling of the sitters also forces them into easy comparison and differentiation. Nevertheless, the use of repetition in *Being and Having* affords consistency, making no

⁵⁶ Bo Nilsson et al., *Thomas Ruff* (Malmö: Rooseum, 1996), 8.

image more important than the next, highlighting the communal aspect Opie successfully conveys. Furthermore, Opie states that her sitters lived in working-class neighborhoods, largely in Latino populations where street gangs are common, hence the allusions to gangs represented by the teardrop tattoo of “Chicken” and the bandana of “Chief.”⁵⁷ The repetition of aesthetic qualities adds to the democracy of the images, they are all visually equal, nothing is over-emphasized, despite any differences in race and possible socioeconomic backgrounds.

An additional aspect of postmodern discourse is also exemplified in *Being and Having*: theoretical discussions of colonialism and questions of race are paralleled in Opie’s work through her ethnically varied constituents. Gender and racial oppression are implicitly linked through the representation of her diverse community of friends.

Hammond argues that in the 1980s, predominantly white, middle-class lesbians who comprised the initial undertaking of lesbian feminist discourse aged and were eventually replaced by working-class lesbians, women of color, and sexual minorities.⁵⁸ Opie implies how prejudice is present even within lesbian feminist communities as she challenges previous feminist racism and presents a diverse group of women. Opie shows us that sexual desire is not limited by conventional barriers of gender or race.

Opie works paradoxically to explore ideas of community by applying repetitive visual modes, but simultaneously representing each sitter as wholly unique, but never quite thoroughly individualized. The identical color backdrops and the similarities in

⁵⁷ Smith, “The Feminine Gaze,” 83.

⁵⁸ Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America*, 57.

cropping, facial expressions and mustaches all make less apparent specific identities and pushes the series into the conceptual. One could argue, however, that through these repetitive tropes, the individual characteristics become even more obvious. Moreover, the closeness of the camera to each model's face discloses a tremendous amount of detail and creates very clear distinctions. Although the sitters each have definitive facial attributes and the nameplates emphasize the specific male alter-ego of each, *Being and Having* is visually communal and repetitive; the lone individual is not emphasized. Instead, what we are presented with are superficial and stereotyped appearances of the masculine lesbian, gay male clone or perhaps even the hyper-masculine man.

The series is no longer about the grandeur of the individual in the portrait; it is a vehicle for visibility and transgression for the alternative lesbian community, many of whom belong to the S&M subculture. Contrary to Opie's later series *Portraits* (1993-1997), *Being and Having* does not primarily accentuate personalized identities (Figure 14). Instead, Opie turns the sitters into stereotyped and masked alternative personas, not fully specified or discernible individuals, as is exemplified by the repetition and "disguises." Presenting the individual within the community, *Being and Having* works as a visual paradox effectively portraying the singular among the serial. Opie's own alter-ego, "Bo," also included in the series, works as further evidence of this paradox: Opie shows her own position in this community as well as her alternative to female and male identity through a very personal and developed alternate persona called "Bo."

BO

Further highlighting the contradictory aspects of the singular and the communal in *Being and Having*, Opie portrays her own involvement in the daddy/boy subculture by inconspicuously inserting herself into the series as her male alter-ego, “Bo” (Figure 15). “Bo,” like his constituents, puts the viewer into a trance with his direct, outward gaze.⁵⁹ His short, nearly black hair sweeps above his left eyebrow and matches the hair of his mustache, which appears to be neatly floating just above his upper lip, partially obscuring it. His silver hooped earrings dangle from his flattened ears and fade into the background. Patches of highlights on his face reveal wrinkles and creases in his skin. Here, Opie presents an alternative to her everyday identity demonstrating herself as a variable being. Furthermore, although Opie and others have placed her firmly within the documentary photography tradition, by inserting herself, she rejects strictly objective, voyeuristic documentation and confirms her place within this minority. Instead of simply documenting some outsider group, Opie exposes her own performative identity and shows a critical self-awareness by presenting herself in the guise of her masculine alter-ego. She therefore transforms the personal and autobiographical into a broader enquiry about contemporary communities and personal identities. Opie makes clear the emotional and psychological ties she has invested in the body of work: what is at stake in her work is her own identity as well. Through “Bo,” Opie’s personal and collective identities

⁵⁹ I refer to “Bo,” using a male gendered pronoun because this is how Opie refers to “Bo.” However, I describe the other sitters using female gendered pronouns to highlight the fact that, according to Opie in Anna Marie Smith’s article “The Feminine Gaze,” at the time that *Being and Having* was made, all of the women in the series were “woman-identified.” Additionally, through my research I did not find evidence that the other women in the series acted out their alternative personas in real life as Opie did with “Bo.”

conflate to create a unique display of the artist's non-traditional, self-reflexive portrait. Opie uses the portrait to effectively highlight an alternative notion of identity, one that is forever changing, thereby defying existing categories of male and female in her portrayal of "Bo."

The notion of identity is a normative concept to begin with, but Opie affirms her interest in shifting, non-traditional identities, declaring, "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."⁶⁰ She further explains, "He [Bo] 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."⁶¹ Opie asserts, "I didn't ever want to just do a portrait of me as Cathy" and goes on, adding, "I like things that supposedly aren't within the norm."⁶² "Bo" represents this apparent abnormality and has the potential to provoke threatening or unsettling feelings from the mainstream viewer. Fear could generate from Opie's otherness or ambiguity, disturbing the identity system upon which we have been taught to rely. Once our identifying structures have been uprooted, as done by "Bo," we are confronted with an uncontainable identity which seems out of the norm. There is an inherent cultural need to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes and when the distinction is not preserved an image such as "Bo" can create disconcerting responses, precisely Opie's goal.

⁶⁰ McKenna, "Welcome to Opie's World."

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ferguson, Decker and Bush, *Catherine Opie: The Photographers' Gallery, London*, 46.

Although the viewer will attempt to categorize and contain Opie and the sitters' genders, the exercise will ultimately prove futile.

By including herself as “Bo,” Opie confirms the postmodern, queer approach towards identity as being fragmented, fluid, and ambiguous. In 1985, queer theorist Teresa de Lauretis argued that current debates surrounding feminism revolved around “the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity.”⁶³ Similarly, other postmodern theorists describe the contemporary subject as “a being who is centerless and divided, a compilation of partial identities where disparate potentials freely compete.”⁶⁴ Like postmodernist art, contemporary identity can be pastiche, or a hodgepodge of different identities, rather than a fixed, stable one, as has been argued as the norm since the time of René Descartes and his conceptions of rationalized being. This traditional Cartesian model of selfhood has continued to uphold gender differences, that is, male as tied to the mind and female to the body, and therefore perpetuates subordination, hierarchy and dichotomies between men and women.⁶⁵

Similarly, second-wave feminists in the 1970s argued for a unified essentialness and biological foundation to womanhood, typically presumed to be white, heterosexual and middle-class; rifts between straight and lesbian feminists threatened to destabilize women's homogeneity during this time, which many lesbian feminists sought to do. Postmodern feminist artists, however, became interested in depicting taboo, sexually

⁶³ Teresa de Lauretis, “Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts,” in *Feminist Studies: Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 9.

⁶⁴ Ralph Rugoff, *Transformers* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1994), 13.

⁶⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.

explicit imagery for new inquiries into gender and sexuality which were not based on biological differences. Hammond argues that these new lesbian feminist artists “emphasized sex over gender, identified with gay men more than straight women,” as is visually exemplified by *Being and Having* and their masquerade as the gay male clone.⁶⁶ Opie and other postmodern artists and writers critique essentialist feminism by revealing an updated feminist position as being ambiguous in identity, with the possibility of simultaneously assuming masculine and feminine characteristics and certainly not essentialized in any aspect.

In her 2007 essay, “I Am a Monster: The Indefinite and the Malleable in Contemporary Female Self-Portraiture,” artist Loren Erdrich argues that contemporary female portraiture is no longer bound by the Cartesian notion of selfhood as unitary and logical, but instead is represented as unstable and fragmented, albeit generally with a positive understanding of the self.⁶⁷ This is visually represented when considering Opie’s portrait as “Bo,” which can be understood as a direct reflection of postmodern gender discourse as being fluid and changeable, contrary to traditional portraiture of the wealthy and privileged, ostensibly demonstrating an organized self-hood. In 1994, curator Ralph Rugoff writes about the transformable and protean self, arguing:

the Other, whether woman, queer, black, or Jew, frequently echo those of the mutating being; the Other is invariably shifty, incoherently formed, unstable, and structurally, or genetically, compromised. The dominant

⁶⁶ Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America*, 101.

⁶⁷ Loren Erdrich, “I Am a Monster: The Indefinite and the Malleable in Contemporary Female Self-Portraiture,” *Circa*, (Autumn, 2007), No. 121, 43-49.

social group, of course, pictures itself as the diametric opposite of this character: it is whole, consistent, and pure.⁶⁸

This conception of the “other” is thus paralleled to the idea of a postmodern self as being fragmented, while the normative social group is understood to be following a model of secure identity. Furthermore, given this quote, we can understand traditional portraits of the “dominant social group” as images of unified selfhood, while Opie’s portraits of the “other” are all but containable.⁶⁹ By changing her body in coded ways, utilizing tattoos, mustaches and piercings, Opie shows that she is part of the leather community, proudly identifying herself as what some today still consider the “other.” Opie questions society’s ability to accept opaque identities, especially in regards to gender, challenging a concept which we use daily for categorization purposes. By portraying herself as male, Opie consciously “others” herself in an attempt to break down the Cartesian, normative structures of selfhood.

Rugoff writes, “As a genre, the personal portrait reflects the Enlightenment view of the individual as owner of a relatively fixed and knowable self, which is possessed as a kind of fenced-in property. Yet Opie’s images “capture” persons in mid-transformations, whose transitional identities overlap as in a palimpsest.”⁷⁰ In fact, some of the women in *Being and Having* have since transitioned to become men, underscoring an absolute shift in gender identity and once again highlighting the convertible qualities of gender. Rugoff goes on, “In this way, Opie’s portraits undermine our penchant for making fixed

⁶⁸ Rugoff, *Transformers*, 40.

⁶⁹ I refer to Opie’s sitters as the “other” because of their marginalized, taboo appearances and sexual preferences.

⁷⁰ Rugoff, *Transformers*, 24.

distinctions, while playing a trick on a medium designed for freezing time.”⁷¹ Although Rugoff refers to the *Portraits* series (1993-1997), this understanding can easily be applied to “Bo” in *Being and Having* as an example Opie gives to highlight the malleable individual. Additionally, by “freezing” time in the photograph, Opie demonstrates another paradox; these women, some soon to be men, are anything but frozen in their gender identities. As Butler argues, “Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time,” as Opie ironically appeals to this notion by “freezing time” through the medium of photography.⁷² Opie, however, does not entirely disappear in her role as “Bo;” the viewer immediately gains a sense of the artificialness of the too perfectly manicured mustache. The obviously false addition does not blend with the freckled skin, highlighting the mutability and temporality of outward appearances.

Rugoff considers the humor evident in the non-fixed self saying that humor is “endemic to transformative aesthetics.”⁷³ As I will argue in the section “Parody,” there is a farcical quality in *Being and Having* that is highlighted by the artificiality of the mustaches and their varying degrees of convincingness. Rugoff argues that such humor is “based on discontinuity, and on the irony of shuffling incompatible parts without ever consolidating them.”⁷⁴ This is exemplified through “Bo,” as Opie highlights the absurd and incongruous appearances of gender, which never quite seem to cohere. She makes no

⁷¹ Rugoff, *Transformers*, 24.

⁷² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22.

⁷³ Rugoff, *Transformers*, 27.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

attempt to hide the artificiality of the mustaches, contributing to the confusion and conflation of genders, thereby creating a comical disjunction. By revealing gender identity as entirely prosthetic, in this case masculinity, Opie successfully engages an amusing critique, disrupting the concept that gender identities are fixed, unchangeable and always natural.

“Bo” is a representation of just one of Opie’s many identities; after *Being and Having*, she periodically creates self-portraits at different intervals, depicting her performance of various roles in her life. In a 2007 interview with Ferguson, he asks Opie about the self-portraits: “Let’s talk about the self-portraits? You’ve now made, really, four.” Opie responds, “Well, three, officially. *Bo* (1994) is kind of a personal one.”⁷⁵ Two years after *Being and Having*, Opie creates her first titled self-portrait, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) (Figure 16). Here, Opie photographs herself against an emerald green backdrop, decorated with a decadent drapery and foliage motif, recalling noble Renaissance portraiture. However, she sits turned away from the camera, refusing our gaze. Her back reveals a crudely depicted scene carved into her skin, portraying two stick figures, both wearing skirts and holding hands with a house, cloud and sun hovering above them. Her skin is bleeding and blotchy red, emphasizing the temporality and immediacy of the photograph. In 1994, Opie creates *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (Figure 17). Opie now faces frontally, however she still declines the viewer’s gaze as her face is entirely covered by a black, leather mask. She photographs herself against a luscious, draping fabric with a black and gold floral pattern. Opie’s chest is exposed revealing skin

⁷⁵ Blessing et al., *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 258.

that, again, has been freshly etched with the word “Pervert” elegantly scrolled just above her breasts, while neat rows of needles pierce both arms. Lastly, in 2004 Opie takes *Self-Portrait/Nursing* and shows herself as loving and nurturing mother, recalling the iconography of the Madonna Lactans (Figure 18). Here the backdrop is a warm red and gold fabric with a floral motif similar to that of *Self-Portrait/Pervert*. Opie only now partially reveals the side of her face while she lovingly gazes down upon her nursing son, still refusing to acknowledge our presence. Her right arm is exposed revealing several tattoos and the faint trace of “Pervert” remains visible on her chest as discernible remnants of the multiple stages of her life.

Opie’s various representations of self-fashioning, posing and performing stem from a long history of self-portraiture. In his book *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*, Harry Berger uses Rembrandt van Rijn as his example to highlight the apparent fictions and fabrications of mimetic painted portraiture. Berger recounts Rembrandt’s extensive experimentation with self-portraiture as he posed in various attire, including over the top costumes, military attire, clothes that were a century out of date and even as a courtier, although he himself was not of noble rank.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Berger asserts that through his self-portraits, Rembrandt “imitates portraits of patrons, courtiers, aristocrats, bravos, and burghers,” but goes on to argue that Rembrandt not only imitated the portraits of nobles, but “parodies them.”⁷⁷ These

⁷⁶ Berger, *Fictions of the Pose*, 363-378.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

parodies were, among other things, critiques of the idea that the act of deliberate posing for a portrait actually represented an individual's true inner character.

The poses of painted portraiture, Berger asserts, are fictions and fabricated based on preexisting codes and etiquettes of bourgeois portraiture. Similarly, Opie does not try to trick us into believing that the sitters in *Being and Having*, or herself as "Bo," are true documents of their inner characters, but rather explicitly shows that there is much left unrepresented in portraiture. Like Rembrandt, Opie creates diverse experimentations in self-portraiture and investigates cultural codes and signifiers. However, Opie complicates this tradition even further because she periodically acts out her role as "Bo" in real life, acknowledging both the fabricated nature of portraiture and the truth of documentary photography.

Contrary to many of Rembrandt's self-portraits, Opie explores purportedly *truthful* psychic and physical self-boundaries through various representations of her body, from piercings, tattoos and cuttings, to the physical effects of pregnancy. By showing different stages in her life, Opie effectively multiplies the self, exposing transitional periods and challenging the normative structures of identity. Opie transforms from a woman longing for domesticity in *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, to menacing S&M player in *Self-Portrait/Pervert* to nurturing mother in *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, showing that being one identity does not necessarily exclude becoming another. Furthermore, Opie includes herself once again as "Bo" in 1994 in her *Portraits* series (Figure 19). Here, however, "Bo" is presented at approximately 60 x 30 inches, nearly life-sized, dressed in baggy jeans, a cut-off flannel, worker boots and the ubiquitous, fake black mustache. Adding to

the “butch” appearance are “Bo’s” arm tattoos and large silver hoop earrings. Additionally, “Bo’s” fabricated pose, similar to the poses of Rembrandt, reveal preexisting culturally coded meanings. In this case, the deliberate “masculine” stance, coupled with the fact that “Bo” looks slightly off and unconvincing, immediately suggests to the viewer that this is a woman, posing as a man, therefore leaving the viewer to interpret these signs as statuses of lesbianism. Opie argues “We all have different personas living inside us,” and demonstrates that self-portraits can act as tools to fully realize the self. Thus, “Bo” acts as a true masculine component contributing to the whole of Opie’s identity.⁷⁸

Contrary to “Bo” in *Being and Having*, lesbian identity is not inscribed on the body as a permanent mark, like a tattoo, as art historian Rebecca Weller argues is the case with “Bo” (1994) from the *Portraits* series. Rather, Opie’s deviant, queer identity is expressed and satirized in the form of a temporary prosthetic--the mustache--accentuating the temporality of identities and emphasizing the possibility of change. Referring to the 1900s, Weller explains “Tattooing challenges the dominant notions of the sanctity of the body. At the turn of the century, tattoos signified criminality.”⁷⁹ Today, we may argue that tattoos continue to be read as indications of deviance. However, in *Being and Having*, “Bo’s” potential criminal and deviant signifier is the fake mustache. The mustache “Bo” wears works to challenge the presumption of an undivided selfhood and is a subversive tool to undermine homogenous views of lesbian identity and gender

⁷⁸ McKenna, “Welcome to Opie's World.”

⁷⁹ Rebecca Ann Weller, “Writing the Body: The Work of Mira Schor, Lynn Hershman, and Catherine Opie” (Master’s thesis, University of California, Riverside, 1998), 95.

dichotomies. Through “Bo,” Opie is deceptive, although purposefully unsuccessful, revealing her criminalized outsider status, one that is visually reflected in the frontal, mug shot-like appearance of *Being and Having*. In Opie’s disguised appearance--as the man--we are reminded of the scheming criminal implicitly suggested by Opie through the altered appearance. The mustache, as much as the tattoos, marks Opie’s body as queer and criminalized. As a presumed moral deviant prompted by the presence of the mustache, Opie displays herself as such in temporary disguise in a witty attempt to break down the supposed truth-telling capabilities of the camera and as a sarcastic play on her queer identity, which has historically been criminalized. Rather than affirming the medium of photography as an instrument of truth, Opie recreates her own identity and undermines the ostensibly true documentary photograph.

Curator Kim Fullerton argues “The discourse of camp and the performance of drag subvert and invert heterosexualized notions of gender and, viewed in this way, can be seen as empowering queer practice and political challenge.”⁸⁰ Drag’s parodic imitation performed by Opie’s sitters might be superficial, but is revelatory of a deeper, conceptual self, and as Fullerton argues, can open up for questioning and subversion of “heterosexualized” norms. The caricatural mustache works as a form of drag, functioning as political device and social transformation, having the potential to widen female and male behavior and representation. There is an inherent challenge to strict gender dichotomies when playing with drag, as it exposes gender as socially constructed, essentially artificial and therefore open to change. Drag often indicates the gendered body

⁸⁰ Kim Fullerton and Sky Gilbert, *Fabrications: Hamish Buchanan, Catherine Opie, David Rasmus* (Toronto: Toronto Photographers Workshop, 1995), 4.

underneath the costume, but Opie's sitters are entirely ambiguous; even upon the removal of the fake mustache, the sitter will remain ambiguous, and differ from Western ideologies of a woman's appearances. Additionally, "Bo," as the female transgressor, offers a chance of release from traditional feminine boundaries, as the tattoo has similarly worked to free certain people from normative restraints under modern ideas of unvarying universalism. Notably, the mustache as sole gesture of drag is, perhaps, the most nonfunctional indication of maleness, underscoring the trivial nature of gender assignment. Yet, the sitters also seem to embody the masculinity they play with by way of their stern, unflinching expressions.

Writing fourteen years after the creation of *Being and Having*, queer theorist Judith "Jack" Halberstam argues that women's engagement in drag has continued to be marginalized: "women's involvement in and relation to drag has been left out of theoretical accounts and subcultural histories."⁸¹ This quote highlights the importance of Opie's portraits as she reveals drag to be a significant subversive device that is available to women. Halberstam goes on to state that even as late as the 1990s, "we still believe that masculinity in girls and women is abhorrent and pathological."⁸² This strong, emotional disgust that general society still seems to harbor towards masculinized women additionally provokes fear in the mainstream. Uneasiness can stem from both sides of the gender spectrum when women act masculine or perform drag: men feel threatened by a masculinized woman for fear that their sexuality and power will be usurped, replaced,

⁸¹ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 165.

⁸² Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 268.

and ultimately made useless, while women fear that femininity and women's rights could be damaged or jeopardized. "Bo" exemplifies this potential fear, as Opie, the biological and self-identified female, displays herself as additionally having masculine qualities. Ultimately, by employing drag, Opie co-opts the tradition of the female body in art and society in a successful challenge to normative ideals forced upon women.

In reference to *In a Different Light*, the first specifically "queer" exhibition and held at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum in 1995, curator Laurence Rinder writes "Drag points toward the fact that any gender position is accomplished through role-playing and imitation."⁸³ Three small platinum prints from Opie's *Freeway* series (1994-1995) were included in the exhibition; her work specifically on gender was not shown. However, Rinder's quote informs Opie's similar sentiments when considering it in the context of her portraits as she exhibits that even the man is established through the mask of masquerade. Indeed, men similarly put on a masquerade of maleness to hide their potential for femininity so as to avoid judgment from other men and women. In *Being and Having*, Opie presents the male as literally artificial, made-up, and just as socially constructed as the woman has historically been argued to be. She affirms her power as a woman to mark, decorate or otherwise create her identity as she constructs her own alternative to biologically male masculinity, displaying herself as author of a substitute to the duality of male and female. Given the understandings of postmodern identity discussed above, we find that we are unable to give the expression of an essential self because we all mimic social constructions.

⁸³ Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder and Amy Scholder, editors, *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1995), 6.

Opie creates a performance of herself as a wholly unique male alternative, feeling free to inhabit masculine domains. She thereby presents herself as a temporary, flexible and disconnected self in the form of her male alter-ego. “Bo” is not limited to the imaginary realm, however; he is acted out in Opie’s personal life as well. In fact, we can interpret the inclusion of “Bo” as Opie’s semi-hidden acknowledgement of being a part of this particular subculture. The resulting understanding of “Bo” is a postmodern, multi-dimensional individual, which resists gender classification, cleverly depicted using the tropes of traditional, highly formalized portraiture.

To simply describe this series as a documentation, as Opie and others have done, is not sufficient to fully understand the series’ conceptual depth. By including herself as “Bo,” Opie attaches the series to her own psychological experiences as a queer woman. The effect is that *Being and Having* becomes autobiographical, representing an alternative identity that Opie inhabits, thereby confirming a malleable and inexhaustible persona. In this way, the series can also be understood as being more about the unique individual within the community, representing a paradox between the repetitive images and the singular identity *and* the multiple identities of one person. Furthermore, Opie expands upon conceptions of lesbian identity in *Being and Having*: “The cross-dressing by the women in my photographs fits into this pattern of exploring the possibilities of S/M culture,” freeing herself from the restrictions of conventional behaviors even within the realm of taboo culture.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Smith, “The Feminine Gaze,” 83.

CHAPTER 2: PORTRAIT PARADOX: PARODY in the TIME of AIDS

Why are writers of Opie's work so motivated to interpret her portraits as severe, combative images? Nearly all writers and reviewers of Opie acknowledge the confrontational, dignified or startling appearance of her sitters in *Being and Having*, but seldom is the parodic mentioned in regards to her work. Many fixate on the apparent seriousness in her portraits and overlook the underlying humor about them. Reviewers of Opie's series *Being and Having* characterize the portraits by using such words and phrases as, "her stare is hard" and "cocky," and they "confront us with their integrity."⁸⁵ Additionally, Jean Dykstra, a contributing writer to *Art in America*, writes of *Being and Having* that "they look directly, fiercely, into the camera."⁸⁶ Dykstra goes on to state that, "Opie herself plays 'Bo,' looking tough and serious."⁸⁷ Furthermore, artist Nina T. Becker and art historian Sally Stein argue that the representations in *Being and Having* are serious portraits that "demand respect" and work as sympathetic images.⁸⁸

The images do indeed perform as tools to afford dignity and visibility to a specific lesbian subculture, however, solely focusing on this aspect limits the range of analysis and function of the portraits. Perhaps contextual knowledge that Opie created these photographs during a certain moment at the height of the AIDS crisis has motivated the idea that they are purely "serious" images. Nevertheless, I do not believe that Opie's

⁸⁵ Knight, "Sitting Pretty." Marc Selwyn, "Report from Los Angeles: New Age Subversives?" *Flash Art International*, May/June 1995, Issue 182, 98.

⁸⁶ Dykstra, "Opie: The Community of Difference," 132.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Nina T. Becker and Sally Stein, "Insert Lesbian Here: Catherine Opie and the L Word," June 13, 2008, 4, www.beckerprojects.com/writing/insert_lesbian_here.pdf.

sitters in *Being and Having* simply “demand respect,” but rather parody both stereotypical lesbian and gay male appearances (and perhaps for viewers not familiar with gay male clone culture, may also be interpreted as a parody of hyper-masculinity), parody the conventional austere male portrait and work to critique gendered binaries. I assert that Opie’s depiction of the sitters with their unflinching expression in the guise of a formal portrait successfully combines severity and drollness to create parody in *Being and Having*. The images are comical in their associations with drag, but are sincere in their critique of gender binaries, stereotypes and homophobia and in their function for visibility during the AIDS crisis. Opie’s critique is intended to be genuine; however, humor allows for the ridicule of gender norms and stereotypes as Opie exhibits a tongue-in-cheek twist in the history of the portrait genre.

PARODY

The few critics who do briefly mention the parodic effects that *Being and Having* garners do not expand on the farcical elements or the potential for humor as an effective critical tool. For instance, in her review of Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art’s exhibition titled “Currents ’93: Dress Codes,” Francine Koslow Miller briefly mentions Opie’s parody: “Opie’s series of color photographs entitled “Being and Having,” 1991--close-up frontal images of “daddy/boy” lesbians who wear moustaches and the accessories of male street gangs--succeed as engaging parodies of male portraiture.”⁸⁹ Additionally, Opie herself asserts, in reference to *Being and Having*, that “in this particular case, borrowing from male imagery means borrowing from a kind of Latino-

⁸⁹ Francine Koslow Miller, “Currents ’93: Dress Codes,” *Artforum*, November 1993, 111.

influenced working-class imagery that we're getting from personal contacts."⁹⁰ Not only does Opie parody a long history of male portraiture, here she exposes a more explicit parody of the hyper-masculine Los Angeles gang subculture, which she appropriates for her daddy/boy clone look and which parallels the deviant subculture that Opie seeks to reveal. Moreover, Opie parodies the typological portraits, like those of Sander, to critique the stereotype that all lesbians look a certain way or want to look and/or act like men.⁹¹ Similarly, in 1996, Kimmelman writes, "These have been described as dignified images, which is partly their point, no doubt, but they also affect a certain fantastical and lighthearted humor."⁹² Art writer Ezra Jean Black's review of Opie's work notes that the portraits are serious, "but not without humor."⁹³ Additionally, in her master's thesis, Jennifer Tobitha Bridges argues that Opie's *Being and Having* series along with *Portraits* "parody the constraining binary gender discourse and stereotypes that emanate from it."⁹⁴ Bridges observes that Opie's series *Being and Having* and *Portraits* are both "saturated with absurdity and sarcasm."⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Bridges does not go beyond a mere mention of the humorous nature of the portraits and fails to define the term parody. It is clear that Opie's apparent use of parody deserves a considerably more thorough analysis.

⁹⁰ Smith, "The Feminine Gaze," 83.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹² Kimmelman, "Catherine Opie."

⁹³ Ezra Jean Black, "Catherine Opie: Regen Projects," *Artillery Magazine*, May 2013, Vol. 7, Issue 5, 47.

⁹⁴ Jennifer Tobitha Bridges, "From Typologies to Portraits: Catherine Opie's Photographic Manipulations of Physiognomic Imagery" (Master's thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005), 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

The blithe aspect of *Being and Having* is wholly illuminated in a 2010 interview with Xiaoyu Weng of the Kadist Art Foundation done in Los Angeles. In the interview, Opie speaks about *Being and Having*. She starts by explaining: “You know my friends and I, we were all playing around with gender at that point and just having fun and we would wear our mustaches and go out to clubs at night to lesbian bars and try to pick up women on our motorcycles.”⁹⁶ This occasional use of the mustache also points to a social practice, highlighting real life gender subversion within Opie’s community. In describing the process by which *Being and Having* was created, Opie states, “I just asked all my friends, I gave them ten bucks to go buy a mustache at the Hollywood wig shop and they all did special things to their mustaches and then I had all their nicknames.”⁹⁷ Opie encouraged her friends to look “masculine” however they saw fit and were told to decorate their mustaches in whatever ways they desired. The varying degrees of verisimilitude and cogency in the mustaches heightens the playful and parodic effect of the photographs. Furthermore, parody in *Being and Having* is enhanced and underscored because Opie’s friends had not previously owned or typically worn fake mustaches as part of their daily attire. The sitters utilized the mustaches for the sole purpose of posing for the portraits; when the mustaches were periodically used at night, it was clearly a kind of performance, not a true attempt at passing as men.

The nonchalance with which Opie explains the images begins to reveal the flippant effect of the series. For instance, later in the interview Opie explains the

⁹⁶ “Kadiview with Catherine Opie,” YouTube video, interview conducted by Xiaoyu Weng, Kadist Art Foundation, Los Angeles 2010, uploaded July 16, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKGbnfjAS64>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

nicknames: “Steak was Steak House, but she picked Luigi, I think just because when she saw her photograph I think she ended up thinking, oh this would be great if it was Luigi,” demonstrating the improvisation and flexibility of the series.⁹⁸ This also creates compelling incongruences between the different levels of role-play represented; for instance, “Luigi” is clearly very playful and made up spontaneously, whereas “Bo,” Opie’s own alter-ego, is a persona that Opie has very much thought through, as she plays him in real life. Additionally, during the interview, Opie chuckles at recalling the enjoyable retrieval and creation of the mustaches and the play in name change. Opie further reveals the amusing nature of the series by referring to the gestures of masculine performance as “gender games.”⁹⁹

Contemporary literary theorist Gérard Genette is especially renowned for his work on parody, thus I use his definitions and explanations of parody as a basis for interpreting *Being and Having*. Genette begins by tracing the beginnings of parody to classical antiquity and Aristotle’s “Poetics,” the earliest known text on literary theory. Genette tracks the etymology of the word “parodia” to mean singing beside, or the transposition of a melody, in other words, the modification of an original.¹⁰⁰ He goes on to define parody as a mockery of a “noble or merely serious genre,” and further asserts

⁹⁸ “Kadiview with Catherine Opie.”

⁹⁹ Smith, “The Feminine Gaze,” 83.

¹⁰⁰ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 20.

that “parody inevitably connotes satire and irony.”¹⁰¹ The irony in Opie’s work is that she successfully works within the portrait tradition, while simultaneously subverting its elite status. Although Genette uses several examples of parody from antiquity within the genre of literature, art historians have appropriated the term parody from the domain of literature. Today the word retains the definitions described above and is applicable in critical writings on contemporary art and thus pertinent in the interpretation of *Being and Having*.

A parody, as Genette explains, is an imitation “loaded with satirical or caricatural effect.”¹⁰² Applying this understanding to *Being and Having*, Opie’s imitation of sober portraits exposes her use of wit and irony and operates in unveiling homophobia and gender dichotomies by way of overtly false exaggerations. This is perfectly embodied by Opie’s caricatured women, dressed as homosexual men, as they stare back at the viewer. Artificial mustaches adorn the sitters and the potential for comic effect emanates from their faked appearances. However, we should keep in mind that some of the women in these photographs took their temporary performances more seriously than others. Their mustaches do work to play with and parody gender construction, but in the case of “Bo” in particular, the mustache is also an outgrowth of Opie’s own very authentic desires. Nevertheless, Opie purposefully exaggerates the features to the point that they become positively unbelievable; we must also keep in mind that Opie deliberately exposes the glue and netting of the mustaches. The sitters in *Being and Having* are so theatrical that

¹⁰¹ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 12.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 23.

there can be no doubt as to their temporal performativity as they conflate stereotypes of the lesbian, the gay male clone, and/or the heterosexual macho man, and expand the function of the traditional portrait. The very fact that one finds it difficult to sort through the layers of ambiguities given Opie's own statements of potential references give these images a great deal of power and reinforces the idea that the portraits resist placement into any neat categories of gender or sexuality.

We can interpret Opie's work to be ironic, both serious and situated firmly within the genre of portraiture, thereby confirming its status, while simultaneously undermining society's presumptions and stereotypes. The color and obvious artificialness of the props create an amusing image, while the serious, almost aggressive stares of the sitters can, contrarily, be interpreted as antagonistic. This ambiguity is bolstered as Opie counterposes the high art of mimetic portraiture with the artificially mustachioed representatives of a socially marginalized group. This creates a dramatically ironic statement, thus becoming parodic. Opie has succeeded in creating a visual paradox, one in which the unsmiling faces assert themselves while the obviously faked mustaches generate a comical appearance. Opie depends entirely on the prestige of the portrait tradition in order to present her sitters as acceptable and worthy of consideration from mainstream audiences. The photographs leave the viewer feeling ambivalent about the complex and puzzling images and the contradictory perceptions derived from them.

Genette goes on to explain parody as a technique in which a "noble style" (portraiture) depicts "a lowly and laughable subject" (women in drag as the stereotyped

gay male or lesbian butch).¹⁰³ Opie, in fact, uses portraits for their original purpose, that is to give her community visibility, but simultaneously acknowledges that this group of people have been traditionally marginalized, therefore becoming a parody of the “noble” genre of portraiture. Historically, these subjects would not have been afforded the dignity or honor of having their portrait painted or photographed. However, in *Being and Having* Opie preserves the style and elite status of portraiture while exposing the “antithetical subject.”¹⁰⁴

Opie cites Holbein as an inspiration for her portrait series, in particular the single-hued backgrounds and formality that grants dignity to the sitter.¹⁰⁵ It is possible to recognize *Being and Having* as a parody of the art of mimetic portraiture because the series contains formalist characteristics similar to those of Holbein and other Renaissance portraitists. In Holbein’s *Self-Portrait*, circa 1542-43, we see a closely cropped head and tops of the shoulders of the artist, exposing a bit of his elegant blouse (Figure 20). Positioned in a three-quarter pose, Holbein fixates on a point in the distance, his name in script just above his head. Tellingly, Holbein is positioned against a golden-yellow backdrop and resembles the overall appearance of Opie’s *Being and Having*. Perhaps it is this exact portrait of Holbein that initially inspired Opie to use the solid yellow background and closely cropped heads for her first portrait series. Indeed, the similarities seem to go beyond mere coincidence, as Holbein presents himself closely cropped and renders specific details of his beard and mustache. Holbein was renowned for his detailed

¹⁰³ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 11.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ “Catherine Opie in ‘Change’.”

depictions of his sitters and Opie parodies this uniqueness by repeating nearly identical aesthetic attributes in each image. Parody is also reflected in the substitution of the privileged, white male subject with the marginalized queer woman.

The portrait has traditionally been understood as a truthful, exact visual rendering of the unique sitter.¹⁰⁶ In her Master's thesis titled "Challenge and Formal Construction in the Works of Catherine Opie," Carolee Moore argues that "Holbein would very slightly misalign or exaggerate certain features to emphasize the uniqueness of the individual he was rendering and to ensure likeness."¹⁰⁷ In *Being and Having*, instead of emphasizing uniqueness, Opie essentially disguises the sitter and presents each with similar attributes, including lack of body or any other unique identifier, effectively usurping the traditional function of the portrait. Opie thereby questions the ability to capture the unique individual through portraiture by presenting each sitter with nearly the exact same poses--reminding us of Rembrandt's parodic posing--positions of the head, and expressions of the face. Opie illustrates the photograph's inability to transparently provide "truth;" she highlights the viewer's preconceived notions about lesbian identity and reveals her subjective position as artist by inserting herself. By exposing the superficiality and artifice of the mustaches, Opie parodies the idea that the traditional portrait is able to capture a truthful inner essence, limiting the scope of our knowledge to the facade.

In the tradition of portraiture and society in general, women have been seen to be self-decorative, vain beings. In *Being and Having*, Opie parodies this sentiment by

¹⁰⁶ Woodall, "Introduction: Facing the Subject," 1-3.

¹⁰⁷ Carolee Cecilia Moore, "Challenge and Formal Construction in the Works of Catherine Opie" (Master's thesis, The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2009), 8-9.

decorating her women with male attributes, not with standard feminine accessories. In Renaissance portraiture of women, because of the focus on idealization, myth and beauty, women lost their individual identities in favor of a generalized, quintessential image.¹⁰⁸ By typifying her sitters and photographing them in a formulaic way, Opie parodies this tradition of women's portraiture. Opie challenges conventional images of women and patriarchal structures and instead portrays the constructed masculinization of the female body. In "Duchamp's Masquerades" Dawn Ades quotes Joan Rivière's essay "Womanliness as Masquerade" as arguing "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men."¹⁰⁹ Opie takes this idea of the intentional construction of "womanliness" as a sort of mask and through the use of prosthetic male accessories, parodies this notion in *Being and Having*. Opie affirms for us that male gender is also socially constructed and therefore subject to transformation and female appropriation.

In his book *Female Masculinity*, Judith "Jack" Halberstam argues that the drag king performs the "nonperformativity" of masculinity and that this performance of masculinity is often done "parodically."¹¹⁰ Following Halberstam's argument, I suggest that Opie's portraits of "drag kings" should be interpreted as performances of the "nonperformativity" of masculinity rather than the standard interpretations as aggressive,

¹⁰⁸ Woodall, "Introduction: Facing the Subject," 2.

¹⁰⁹ Dawn Ades, "Duchamp's Masquerades," in *The Portrait in Photography*, ed. Graham Clarke. (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1992), 113.

¹¹⁰ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 259 and 232. According to Del LaGrace Volcano, a drag king is "Anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity." Judith "Jack" Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano, *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), 16.

or serious images. Moreover, the tradition of portraiture has been to show the sitter as serious, calm and reserved, which may also explain the supposedly “confrontational,” non-expressiveness of the sitters, again proving the images to be parodies of the genre of portraiture.¹¹¹ Furthermore, queer theorist Carole-Anne Tyler explains drag as a “parodic or ironic exaggeration.”¹¹² Opie’s sitters purposefully show their drag costumes as the most unflattering characteristics of maleness, for example the cigarette hanging out of the mouth, the facial tattoo, and the backwards hat, are amusingly exaggerated and exposed. In regards to drag kings, Halberstam writes that there is an element of “anarchic playfulness,” as is exemplified by the imitative stares in *Being and Having*.¹¹³ Halberstam also describes humor as an “effective tool for exposing the constructedness of male masculinity” and is successful in exposing male anxiety and fragility.¹¹⁴ Opie’s sitters temporarily perform drag to poke fun at any assumed gender identity and stability, particularly maleness. Moreover, drag is interpreted as “wearing the mantle of authority as a way of deflating the power of that authority.”¹¹⁵ We can apply this to *Being and Having* as a way of understanding the series as a humorous device to challenge heteronormativity and patriarchal dominance.

Gender destabilization and drag is often considered a form of fun; there is a certain pleasure that is derived from breaking normative gendered prohibitions. The

¹¹¹ Berger, *Fictions of the Pose*, 208.

¹¹² Carole-Anne Tyler, “Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* ed. Diana Fuss. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 53.

¹¹³ Halberstam and Volcano, *The Drag King Book*, 16.

¹¹⁴ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 130.

¹¹⁵ Blake, *In a Different Light*, 26.

fantasy that Opie and her sitters embrace in *Being and Having* momentarily affords a freedom from dichotomized reality. The pleasure drawn from this series is a result of the idealization of a fleeting instant caught on camera in which life without rigid gender structures comes to existence. The games of gender in Opie's portraits are paradoxical and complex, whimsical and impish, yet as Halberstam writes on gender play in general, also act as "serious realms for the production of gender difference and the accommodation of gender variance."¹¹⁶ Political implications are inherent in drag activities as they reject the social rules of gender divisions. Opie successfully critiques the general assumption that gender is natural by creating masculinities that are recognizably constructed from props that can be put on and just as easily taken off.

Genette explains that Aristotle "defines the comic subject . . . through the representation of characters who are "inferior" to the average."¹¹⁷ Opie's sitters and their subcultures are typically regarded in mainstream as "inferior" factions of society and these portraits depict persons who are not traditionally eligible to be represented through portraiture. Thus, we encounter a potentially humorous contradiction in Opie's intentionally ironic elevation of the sitters to the heroic status worthy of portraiture. Similarly, philosopher Simon Critchley explains that humor is often caused by a disjunction between expectation and reality and from a distance, the portraits do look like men. However, upon examining the photographs more closely, we realize that we have assumed too much; in fact, the sitters are entirely ambiguous. Opie thereby mocks

¹¹⁶ Halberstam and Volcano, *The Drag King Book*, 39.

¹¹⁷ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 11.

society's reliance on binary gender codes through the use of highly artificial masculine hair. The assumption of one gender and the encountering of another causes a bizarrely humorous discrepancy; perhaps this also engenders a bit of anxiety on behalf of the viewer. Among other things, humor in this series results from the incongruity between the genre of portraiture and the marginalized subject and the shock generated when viewing ambiguous beings.

Genette writes "The most elegant parody, since it is the most economical, is then merely a quote deflected from its meaning or simply from its context, or demoted from its dignified status."¹¹⁸ This explicitly relates to Opie's title of the series itself, *Being and Having*, which is a parodic reference to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of sexuality. Lesbians, including those in the *Being and Having* series, prove a theoretical challenge to Lacan's binary structure. Butler argues that Lacan has a difficult time finding a place for women, particularly lesbians, within this framework, especially in terms of female desire and sexuality. Through the use of her parodic title, Opie implicitly questions his structure, showing the Lacanian model to be wrong, restrictive and binary.¹¹⁹ Lacan's theory hinges upon dichotomized understandings of gender and sexuality, which Opie and her queer cultures refuse to fit into neatly. The play in the title *Being and Having* shows that women have the potential, just as much as men, to create their own constructions of masculinity.

¹¹⁸ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 17.

¹¹⁹ Weller, "Writing the Body," 8.

For those who are well acquainted with psychoanalysis, *Being and Having* would be a fairly obvious reference to the well-known Lacan whose theory is based on an assumption of heteronormative interpretations of gender. Paradoxically, however, Opie mocks heteronormativity as she both validates stereotypical lesbian, heterosexual and homosexual male identities while simultaneously destabilizing them. Nevertheless, Opie purposefully appropriates Lacan's terms "being" and "having" to deflect from their original meaning, uprooting them from their distinguished positions, thereby forming a critique. The similar phrasing signifies that a parody takes place and is explicitly related to a certain original source, in this case Lacan, in order to subvert heterosexual and dichotomized gender foundations upon which Lacan's theory is rooted.

Halberstam explains that "psychoanalysis has increasingly proven inadequate to the particular narratives of desire common to the late twentieth century."¹²⁰ He goes on to say that Freud's theory of "penis envy" is "difficult to invest in" because we are now "at a time when sex seems to be obviously prosthetic," showing that masculinity can be transferable and substituted by many things.¹²¹ Moreover, according to Tyler, the "penis is not the phallus," but rather the phallus is an intangible symbol of power that is not necessarily attached to a biologically male body, which therefore can be appropriated by any gender or sexuality.¹²² Lastly, Halberstam states that there exists "penisless models of

¹²⁰ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 118.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Tyler, "Boys Will Be Girls," 40.

masculinity” and the histories of masculine females show that women can occupy maleness as is similarly visualized in *Being and Having*.¹²³

Although we are unaware if the series *Being and Having* was intended to be parodic, it is legitimate for the audience to conceive of it as so. Genette gives an example in which the poet “involuntarily acts as a parodist,” which reinforces the understanding of the series as parodic, even if “involuntary.”¹²⁴ This quote underscores the recognition that an artwork’s meaning does not hinge solely on the artist’s intent, but rather on how the reader or viewer interprets that work; the artist is not the lone source of meaning. This understanding highlights the possible ambivalent qualities that works of art may have simultaneously, lending support to my argument that the images are at once humorous, yet critical. Additionally, Opie herself has made references to several possible identities presented in the series: Do these images present the stereotypical lesbian visage? the gay male clone? or the hyper-masculine working class Latino? Depending on who is doing the looking, these images may have various meanings and interpretations. Furthermore, Chuck Kleinhans argues that “parody does not reside in the work alone, but rather derives from a stance people take toward it.”¹²⁵ By considering the multiplicity of alternative meanings and functions, the series takes on layers of intricacies, and thus a more interesting approach towards portraiture. Although Opie may not have intended for the series to specifically work as parody, the reception of the work has a certain playful

¹²³ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 151.

¹²⁴ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 15.

¹²⁵ Chuck Kleinhans, “Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the politics of parody,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer. (London: Routledge, 1994), 171.

quality that contradicts the serious nature and intention of the traditional portrait and Opie's genuine critique of heteronormativity and homophobia.

What I have argued is that Opie's series *Being and Having* is generated around conceptions of queerness and issues surrounding gender authenticity during the postmodern era. Postmodern feminist artists revealed that gender is socially constructed and Opie successfully employs the tropes of portraiture in a critical, humorous way to expose the manufactured nature of gender and to parody stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Furthermore, Opie's formalist techniques, particularly color and repetition, highlight the absurd appearances of the sitters in order to elicit a challenge to the genre of portraiture. Opie's portraits, however, also perform an important role in queer visibility during the AIDS crisis through their appropriation of the gay male clone look, perhaps as a suggestion of queer solidarity. In this instance, the sitters do engage a more serious message and in this way could be considered as somber images, contrary to the comical or parodic interpretations I have expounded upon in this section. Thus, the intentions and receptions of *Being and Having* are ambivalent and contradictory. From blending the documentary and the conceptual, simultaneously drawing in and repelling the viewer, Opie engages with multiple layers of paradoxes and leaves the viewer in an unresolved tension somewhere between fantasy and sympathy.

AIDS

In *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, art historian Douglas Crimp quotes artist and film critic B. Ruby Rich in 1988 as arguing "To speak of sexuality and the

body, and not also speak of AIDS, would be, well obscene.”¹²⁶ While this discussion of *Being and Having* has been largely based on complications of gender identity and sexuality, it would be remiss not to place the artwork into the historical context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This section underscores the significance of art making in the queer community during this time and links this importance to portraiture. Although Opie’s series *Being and Having* may not be an explicit reference to AIDS, it is essential to examine the connections between AIDS, portraiture and queer culture. Additionally, the sitters’ masquerade as homosexual men makes the series all the more relevant in terms of the connections to HIV/AIDS. Opie herself affirms, “All of a sudden AIDS had a huge effect on me and my friends. I decided that I really, really needed to make portraits of my friends.”¹²⁷ Opie’s close proximity to the AIDS epidemic prompted her to create documentary portraits of her community, starting with the series *Being and Having*.

Opie declares that the creation of her early portraits were “important politically, coming out of the Reagan and Bush eras, considering what was happening with AIDS and with identity politics. I wanted to educate people about their conceptions of homosexuality.”¹²⁸ Indeed, the acronym AIDS immediately generated stereotypes relating to homosexual culture, namely that HIV/AIDS only affected gay men or other marginalized subgroups. For example, Crimp states, “in 1988 *Cosmopolitan* ran an article

¹²⁶ Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), 14.

¹²⁷ Kyle Fitzpatrick, “Documenting Communities: An Interview with Catherine Opie,” Los Angeles, I’m Yours, July 9, 2012, <http://www.laimyours.com/21858/documenting-communities-an-interview-with-catherine-opie/>.

¹²⁸ Malik Gaines, “Opie’s Opus,” *The Advocate*, December 19, 2000, Issue 827, 52.

saying that ordinary women were not at risk for HIV,” reflecting the general perception about AIDS as a disease that only affected the “other.”¹²⁹ Because AIDS supposedly did not affect “ordinary” men and women, this virus continued to be overlooked, unstudied in the scientific community, medically mistreated, and essentially ignored by people who had the greatest potential to help. It is no surprise then, as Crimp argues, that homophobia was exacerbated during the 1980s and 1990s because of the claims surrounding AIDS as a homosexual disease. Before 1982, the virus was known as the Gay-Related Immune Deficiency and phrases such as “gay cancer” were used before the advent of the terms HIV and AIDS.¹³⁰ These names were used to propagate the idea that this new disease only affected a limited, undesirable population, and therefore, the disease was largely ignored, prompting queer activists to seek its immediate visibility.

Artists working in the late 1980s and early 1990s produced with new urgency in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. At that moment, the arts were evolving to fit social demands for change and acknowledgement of AIDS and queer communities. Therefore, artwork focusing on HIV/AIDS was not as concerned with conventional aesthetics and frequently took text-based forms. Activist organizations such as Queer Nation, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and SILENCE=DEATH were important and influential in the way art was utilized to promote AIDS awareness. The artworks

¹²⁹ Tina Takemoto, “The Melancholia of AIDS: Interview with Douglas Crimp,” *Art Journal* 62:4 (Winter, 2003): 83.

¹³⁰ Jan Zita Grover, “OI: Opportunistic Identification, Open Identification, in PWA Portraiture,” in *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*, comp. Ted Gott. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1994), 214.

commissioned by these groups were impactful, albeit less personal than Opie's, and were highly successful in gaining support and attention. For instance, these organizations used visual strategies such as text based public advertisements, à la Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger, to inform large audiences, initiate involvement, and scrutinize the government's lack of intervention (Figure 21). Additionally, these groups were involved in postmodern appropriation of preexisting signs and images, for example the group collective General Idea's appropriation of Robert Indiana's *Love* sculpture, transformed to read *AIDS*. Although these striking images and statistics about death may have evoked emotional responses, factually based types of artworks about AIDS did not focus on aesthetics nor did they attempt to personalize the trauma of HIV/AIDS. ACT UP and other activist organizations depersonalized art about AIDS, creating the need for a literal face of the people who were directly suffering.

Artists' responses to HIV/AIDS were diverse and multidimensional in their representations, but, because of the ostensibly real quality of the figurative photograph, it has been the most effective portrayal for representations of queer and subcultural communities. Many early portraits of those with HIV/AIDS were somber, severe and elegiac, purposefully taken when the person was close to death. For example, photographer Rosalind Solomon took a series of black and white photographs entitled *Portraits in the Time of AIDS* (1988) (Figure 22). Unfortunately, these pictures did not positively illuminate or personalize the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but rather perpetuated mainstream stereotypes about people with AIDS. Crimp argues that Solomon's subjects were typified and categorized solely as AIDS victims and lacked any complexity in their

life outside of the disease.¹³¹ Many of Solomon's photographs showed individuals alone in bed with little information about them, highlighting only their apparent illness.

Similarly, photographer Nicholas Nixon took images of people with AIDS, also in black and white (Figure 23). The series was taken at intervals to mark the effects of their illness, thus documenting the individuals' physical and psychological deterioration. The documentation of the progression of AIDS on their bodies, most of whom are nude, gay men, underscored the apparent inevitability of death.¹³² Nixon purposefully displayed the diseased homosexual body, selecting subjects with the most visible signs of AIDS, representing them at their worst state, therefore perpetuating pity, horror and fear. These images also reinforced the idea that the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS ostracized the person from mainstream society and life in general. ACT UP protested Nixon's images, which were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1988 in an exhibition titled *Pictures of People*, because they purportedly reinforced the stereotypical depictions of people with AIDS: they portrayed isolation, passivity, and hopelessness.¹³³ Like Solomon's portraits, these individuals were identified based solely on their diagnoses. Furthermore, both Nixon and Solomon were criticized for being voyeuristic--as artists who were working outside of the queer community--and who therefore lacked appropriate authority for taking such invasive pictures.

¹³¹ Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 118 - 123.

¹³² Grover, "OI," 225.

¹³³ Ibid.

Nixon and Solomon's melancholy and dull, black and white photographic portraits of people with AIDS only perpetuated the negative stereotypes put forth by the mass media. Their images neglected to reveal the complexity of life of each individual they were accused of exploiting. The impression that both Nixon and Solomon were presenting sensationalized, voyeuristic images of people with AIDS was exacerbated through their use of black and white photography that lent a distant and morose tone, and suggested impending death.

Opie, on the other hand, took portraits of people in her queer community that are colorful, bright and lively. She produced more optimistic images that worked as a tribute to her community in a way that was very different from Nixon, Solomon other artists' black and white photographs of people in queer communities. Her series *Being and Having* does not present the homosexual community as "victims," like those photographs by Nixon and Solomon, but rather presents her daddy/boy lesbians as vivacious, sexual beings, thereby humanizing the epidemic. Although we do not know if the women in the series had HIV/AIDS, we can be sure that they were part of the immediate community affected by the epidemic and the larger societal implications that surrounded it, namely homophobia. The HIV/AIDS epidemic affected the queer community on a psychological basis as well, affecting the larger homosexual community of which Opie was a part.

Opie implies her message through pictorial practices that focused on the lives of the individuals within the communities most affected by AIDS, rather than through overt statements. The *Being and Having* series avoids spectacularizing HIV/AIDS and instead represents the community as vibrant and resilient. Opie records the prosperity of the

queer community as an animated proclamation of life. Referring to Opie's work, art critic Hunter Drohojowska-Philp writes, "During the 1980s, as she saw friends dying of AIDS, she had a strong urge to make this community more visible. She also wanted to bring dignity to people who were being shunned because of their sexual orientation."¹³⁴ She shows us that the social implications of the epidemic are far reaching, affecting not solely those who have HIV/AIDS, but the queer community's identity as a whole, as she worked to combat increasingly destructive forms of homophobia that came along with the epidemic.

Art journalist Linda Yablonsky writes, "When friends started dying of AIDS, she [Opie] joined ACT UP and Queer Nation, whose politics of visibility led her to show more personal work."¹³⁵ Perhaps tired of encountering impersonal or voyeuristic images of AIDS, Opie chose to highlight images of her own friends, using a familiar and largely universal image, the portrait. By showing brilliant images of her own community, Opie successfully prompted a reconsideration of stereotypes surrounding AIDS and homosexuality. Although they are considered by art historians and critics as tools to challenge binary gender constructions, Opie's portraits served an alternative purpose during this time; the portrait reminded the viewer of the real people in the queer community at large, and worked to keep them close through time, distance and death. In an interview with Ferguson in May 2000, Opie states, "I think a lot of my work is about

¹³⁴ Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, "For Her, It's Always About Community," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 2002.

¹³⁵ Linda Yablonsky, "Body of Evidence," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, Fall 2008, 217.

loss,” emphasizing the sense of destruction engendered by the AIDS epidemic.¹³⁶ Opie’s portraits serve as documentary records of the queer community and in the context of AIDS, fulfill conventional functions of the portrait, serving as reminders of those who are gone.

As I have argued, Opie’s work is replete with contradictions, ambiguity and ambivalence. This is nowhere more evident than when one considers the serious nature of the portrait within the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis: Opie’s *Being and Having* photographs have a playful and even parodic quality, yet they hold serious underlying messages that implicitly link them to AIDS and expose a wider range of social problems of the time such as homophobia, racism and class discrimination. As Jean Dykstra notes, “Opie shares with Walker Evans a fascination with subcultures that have been disparaged or overlooked.”¹³⁷ Like Evans or Dorothea Lange, Opie documented a vanishing part of our history, one that was most psychologically, if not directly, affected by AIDS. The portraits of *Being and Having* are a particular subculture’s voice in response to the indifferences of the heterosexual world to the discrimination of homosexuals and the deaths of thousands of people. Opie realizes art’s power and potential for social influence by focusing on aesthetics and the humanity of her sitters, making them dignified and personal, combining social criteria and traditional aesthetics.

¹³⁶ Ferguson, Decter and Bush, *Catherine Opie: The Photographers’ Gallery, London*, 50.

¹³⁷ Dykstra, “Opie: The Community of Difference,” 130.

CONCLUSION

Opie asserts “I’m a formalist,” stressing her aesthetic strategies as of utmost importance to her work.¹³⁸ The attention to the particular details of color and repetition fulfill her conceptual agenda of deconstructing gender categorization and disrupting historical understandings of documentary photography and the painted portrait. Furthermore, through the use of humor, Opie challenges multiple levels of heteronormativity and patriarchal dominance. By utilizing concretized histories of documentary photography and portraiture, Opie simultaneously embraces and destabilizes these traditions.

Through *Being and Having*, Opie acknowledges that human judgment is often limited to superficialities, reflected in her use of obviously artificial facial props. Opie herself explains, “I wanted to play with our expectations of realism in photographic portraits,” highlighting the incongruences between reality and photographic manipulation.¹³⁹ The behavior, morality and inner character of a person cannot be seen on the outside, contrary to the supposed essence evoked from the conventional portrait. In contemporary understandings of identity, traditional notions of reality in portraiture are seen to be problematic and are questioned by Opie. As Ernst Van Alphen argues, contemporary portraiture “fails to fulfill its traditional promises,” which is exemplified by

¹³⁸ Glen Helfand, “On a Bender,” *Wilde*, May/June 1995, 22.

¹³⁹ Smith, “The Feminine Gaze,” 83.

Opie's *Being and Having*.¹⁴⁰ As I have discussed, contemporary portraiture uproots its traditions of presenting the inner character of the sitter, in favor of a more complex understanding of identity which can be fractured, fragmented and ever changing. Opie provokes us to question truth and reality as she challenges the accepted notions of unified identity in portraiture as well as an essential or true gender. Thus, Opie parodies the idea that character can be seen on the outside; instead Opie invites us to become more broad-minded, humane, empathetic and accepting.

Documentary photography has a history rooted in political motivations. By labeling herself as a "kind of twisted documentary photographer," Opie inserts her work within a tradition of photography that was a part of the progressive social welfare movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America.¹⁴¹ We can perhaps understand her new documentary practice as a postmodern version of this history, as Opie seeks to bring visibility to yet another marginalized faction of contemporary American society. The source of political power in photography is underscored because of the "realness" associated with the photograph, thereby engendering more direct, empathetic appeals. The truthful aspect of Opie's unique form of documentation stems from the fact that Opie actually is a part of the community she is depicting; she is a living testament to the realness of the "abnormal."

Ultimately, Opie's series *Being and Having* results in multiple and unresolvable paradoxes. Opie's work, completed following the initial onslaught of the AIDS epidemic,

¹⁴⁰ Ernst Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 248.

¹⁴¹ McKenna, "Welcome to Opie's World."

humanized and personalized the homosexual community. At the same time, it poked fun at the intentions of traditional portraiture while confounding ideas of gender and highlighting stereotypes of certain groups of people. At once solemn and unemotional, yet bizarrely playful, Opie disrupts and establishes new codes of queer representation through portraiture. Moreover, her work oscillates between personal and communal representations. Her documentations create narratives of her own personal experiences as a queer woman while considering them within the context of a larger community. Opie's portraits challenge the viewer to rethink her or his preconceived and perhaps prejudice notions about stereotypes underlying gender and sexuality. In 1991, Opie explains that the specific aim of this series is to "represent this hidden subculture and challenge the narrowly defined representations of our sexuality."¹⁴² Conclusively, Opie views the series as a way of expanding specifically lesbian identity and reveals how complex and heterogeneous sexuality can be.

This series set the foundation for Opie's later artworks as she continues to create portraits to this day, pursuing her interest in the facades of both people and buildings. Furthermore, since the creation of the series, Opie has retained her interest in documenting structures of communities by photographing subject matter such as cities, freeways and communal gatherings of specific groups of people; for instance, she has since photographed at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a Boy Scout Jamboree, a Tea Party rally and Barak Obama's presidential inauguration.¹⁴³ Clearly her passion for

¹⁴² Smith, "The Feminine Gaze," 83.

¹⁴³ Helen Anne Molesworth, editor, *Catherine Opie: Empty and Full*, (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 2011), 9-11.

photographing the diversity of American culture has persisted as her mainstay and her interest in portraits in particular began with *Being and Having*.

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FIGURES



Figure 1. Catherine Opie. “Luigi,” from the series *Being and Having*, 1991. Chromogenic print with wooden frame and metal nameplate, 17 x 22 inches.



Figure 2. Catherine Opie. the series *Being and Having* (1991) in its entirety. Chromogenic prints with wooden frames and metal nameplates, 17 x 22 inches each.



Figure 3. Catherine Opie. "Papa Bear," from the series *Being and Having*, 1991. Chromogenic print with wooden frame and metal nameplate, 17 x 22 inches.

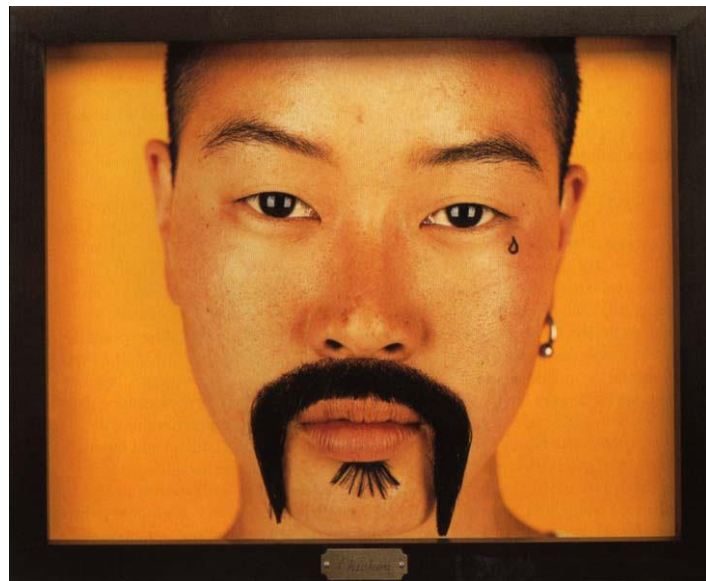


Figure 4. Catherine Opie. "Chicken," from the series *Being and Having*, 1991. Chromogenic print with wooden frame and metal nameplate, 17 x 22 inches.



Figure 5. Catherine Opie. "Chief," from the series *Being and Having*, 1991. Chromogenic print with wooden frame and metal nameplate, 17 x 22 inches.



Figure 6. William Eggleston. *Red Ceiling*, 1973. Dye transfer print, 13 7/8 x 21 11/16 inches.

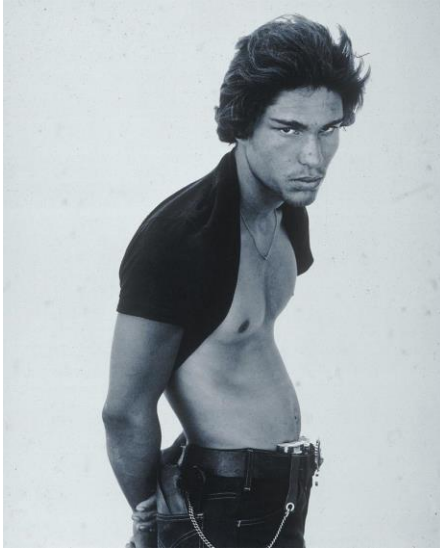


Figure 7. Richard Avedon, "Juan Patricio Lobato, Carney Rocky Ford, Colorado," from the series *In The American West*, August 23, 1980. Gelatin silver print, 22 x 17 inches.



Figure 8. Diane Arbus, *A Young Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C.*, 1966. Gelatin silver print, 15 x 15 inches.



Figure 9. Robert Mapplethorpe. *Self-Portrait*, 1980. Gelatin silver print, 13 15/16 x 14 1/16 inches.

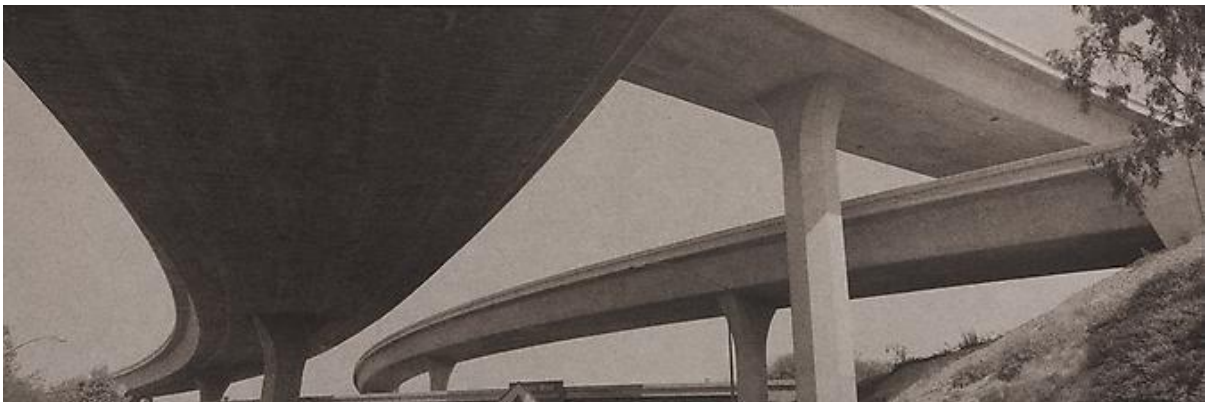


Figure 10. Catherine Opie. "Untitled #1," 1994, from the series *Freeway*. Platinum print, 2 1/4 x 6 3/4 inches.



Figure 11. Catherine Opie. "Untitled #9 (Wall Street)," 2001, from the series *American Cities*. IRIS print, 16 x 41 inches.



Figure 12. August Sander. "Painter (Heinrich Hoerle)," 1928, from the series *People of the Twentieth Century*. Gelatin silver print, 23 x 18 inches.



Figure 13. Thomas Ruff. "Portrait (A. Siekmann)," 1987, from the series *Portraits*. Chromogenic Print, 82 3/4 x 64 7/8 inches.



Figure 14. Catherine Opie. "Jerome Caja," 1993, from the series *Portraits*. Cibachrome print, 19 x 14 3/4 inches.

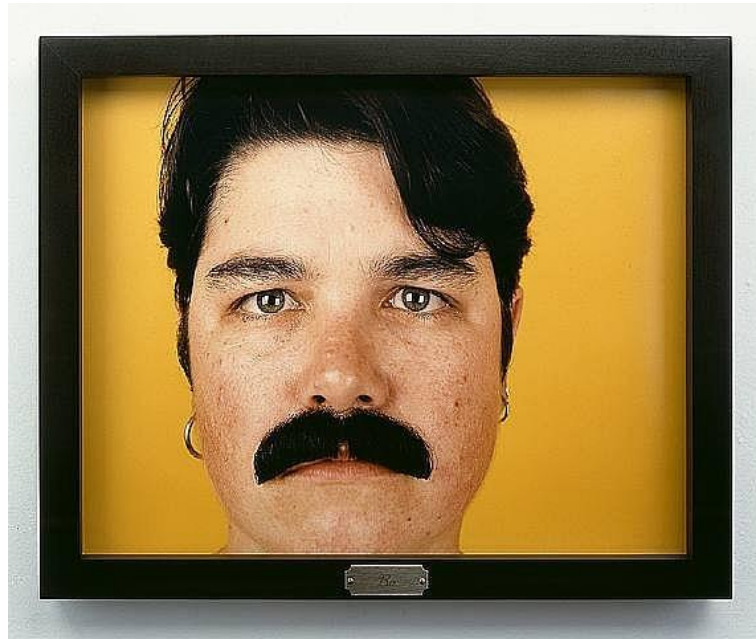


Figure 15. Catherine Opie. "Bo," from the series *Being and Having*, 1991. Chromogenic print with wooden frame and metal nameplate, 17 x 22 inches.



Figure 16. Catherine Opie. *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993. Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches.



Figure 17. Catherine Opie. *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994. Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches.



Figure 18. Catherine Opie. *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004. Chromogenic print, 40 x 32 inches.



Figure 19. Catherine Opie. "Bo," 1994, from the *Portraits* series.
Chromogenic print, 60 x 30 inches.



Figure 20. Hans Holbein the Younger. *Self-Portrait*, circa 1542-43. Colored pastels, 13 x 10 inches.



Figure 21. Gran Fury. *The Government Has Blood on Its Hands*, 1988. Poster, offset lithograph, 31 x 49 inches.

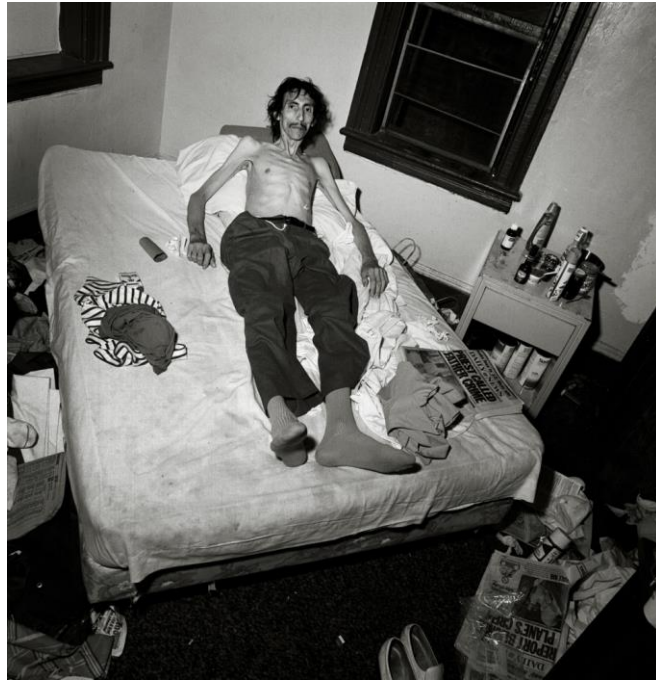


Figure 22. Rosalind Solomon. "New York," 1987, from the series *Portraits in the Time of AIDS*. Gelatin silver print.



Figure 23. Nicholas Nixon. "Donald Perham, Milford, New Hampshire," 1987, from the series *People with AIDS*. Gelatin silver print, 7 11/16 x 9 5/8 inches.