Black Book
"Artist, Leather Dyke, PTA Mom"
By Tyler Green
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This story is about Catherine Opie and four photographs. All are self-portraits. All tell a lot about who Cathy is and why she is an artist and a soon-to-be PTA member. The middle self-portrait has the power of someone whose coming-out stories involve San Francisco and Toronto and not Dubuque and Saskatoon. The most recent self-portrait conveys the contentment of a woman who has found her life partner and loves raising a son with her. We want to know who took the pictures and why.

What makes them so great, so important? Each self-portrait is about what we all want most in our lives: to be loved and to find a place in which we fit. Well, with Cathy's, it's a little more complicated than that. After all, leather dykes with tattoos and piercings want different things than we do, right? Right? But that's jumping ahead too fast; right now it's 1970 in a dying factory town called Sandusky, Ohio.

A nine-year-old girl is in her backyard, playing with a new camera, a birthday present from her parents. This is a real camera, a Kodak Instamatic. A toy camera would not satisfy a nine-year-old who had just written a book report about Lewis Hine, a photographer who documented child laborers. Because this is a real camera, it has a timer mechanism which the girl has just learned how to use. The girl looks through the viewfinder and sees that a lush lawn will fill the foreground of the image, a single-story house with white aluminum siding will fill the right side, and, in a moment, the girl will fill the left side. She sets the timer and walks a few steps backward. She flexes her boogie—"I'm so strong!"—and gets—"I'm so lovable!"—and knows she looks ridiculous—I'm so human! Click.

Sometimes it's jarring to see where someone comes from. Catherine Opie is a superstar artist. Major museums all over the world own her work. She's the photographer whose career took off with portraits of leather folk—you know, the ones who pierce one another with needles, put one another so they bleed, and fist one another—that were first exhibited in 1991. She's the lesbian Robert Mapplethorpe, the bull dyke who shocks us with her kinky little nicks, right?

Not exactly. Yes, when Cathy curates a Mapplethorpe exhibit, she places a portrait of Arnold Schwarzenegger within inches of a portrait of an erection. Okay, Opie is one kinky leather girl, but to understand who she is, to understand why she makes art, we must first understand that one person can need different things; that when she walks out of her studio, she laughs a big laugh and says, "Yeah, I have a baby seat in my car where I used to have whips," that the baby seat is all part of the plan.

All the clues are in that 1970 self-portrait. There's a playful girl in a big backyard, on a beautiful American lawn, behind a simple house outfitted with Sears' finest aluminum siding. A family lives there. Since she took that photo, Cathy went on to college and graduate school and has become an Artist. You might think that a picture taken when she was nine couldn't possibly matter. But it does. So much that comes later, from Cathy's life goals to the focus of her career to falling in love, comes from that photo. Here's how we know: As an adult, Cathy created an alter ego named Bo. Bo was a moustache, a man's plaid shirt, and work boots. In Cathy's mind, Bo was a used-aluminum-siding salesman from Ohio.

In hindsight, the Artist's career looks inevitable. Work gets noticed by a gallery that promotes artists to collectors and curators who make museum shows happen and a star is born. Nevertheless, it is still art—she objects made by the Artist—that feeds the system. So where does that art come from? Why does the Artist make art?

Sometimes—not often enough and only with the very best artists—creation descends from compulsion. The Artist creates because it is how she becomes who she needs to be. Cathy takes pictures because that is how she wants to love, even after a bad breakup. The Artist takes pictures because that is how she tells us who she is. All those pictures lead to one place: The Artist takes pictures because that is how she builds a community around her.

Making art is not an easy thing. The easy thing would be to collect cushy checks from universities to teach art to marginally able students. Instead, Cathy wakes up in the frozen Minnesota dawn, luggs a huge camera out to frozen lakes, and waits for hours, waiting for the color of the sky to match the color of the ice, and only then takes a picture. Instead, she spends seven months waking up before dawn as often as her partner and child will allow her, and drives out to a beach, sits in the fog and waits for surfers to arrive so that she can photograph them. To do all this, Cathy must not be just taking pictures. She must be doing what she needs to do.

And where does that come from? All behavior is learned. Flashback.

Cathy, age 13, is removed from the buckle of the rust belt and dropped into a tract of San Diego's scratchiest backwater and sage. Imagine discovering, at 17, that an actress in the high school musical—Cared—was her name—is fantastically, terrifyingly, strangely interesting to you and that you must become friends...
By 1995, gay America was changing. A cocktail of new drugs was slowing deaths from AIDS, allowing individual energy and community focus to be funneled into comfortable bourgeois interests. Gay ghettos were out, gay assimilation was in.

So photography has helped you find out who you are and helped you enjoy it. But what happens when all these pictures of other people, the portraits of leather folk that made you famous, have accomplished as much as they can accomplish? You're an out and proud leather dyke and everyone knows it. You're met the people you're going to meet. You have said what there is to say about being an out and proud leather dyke.

But there is so much they don't know. Now it is for them to know. It is 1993, and the Reagan/Bush years are over. Now is the time for America to shift its focus from gay people as AIDS patients to gay people as family members. It is time for people to know that you have decided that by the time you're 40, you're going to have a child. It is time for people to know that all you want is what Bo wants: a loving home with a loving partner.

So after years of practice, of taking photographs as a way to make friends, as a way to be invited to play parties, after taking who-knows-how-many self-portraits that could be titled something like Cathy Ainz Angst and Despair that will probably never be seen by anyone but you, you find a new need: to tell people what you want most. You're a photographer, so of course you take a photograph of yourself. And what a picture!

It is a stunningly personal picture, a response to the end of a two-year relationship. It says everything about what you want, about what much of gay America wants and is determined to have. So think of Self-Por
trait (1993) this way: It is an updating of the childhood self-portrait. The house is there, the sky is there, but the girl gets a girlfriend.

In this picture we see Cathy facing away from the camera. We see a tattoo on her upper arm and a lot of metal hanging from her ears. The green cloth background behind Cathy suggests a tapestry that might be in the background of a Van Dyck painting. What is on Cathy's back would not be in a Van Dyck painting.

Catheryn—yes, catheryn—is Cathy's back is a pic
ture. It is a simple picture: two women holding hands, a house, the sun, some clouds. The self-portrait was taken when the cutting was still fresh, blood is still trickling from the cuts. The house is shedding a tear.

Self-Por
trait was an expression of pain and desire, a plea
ing. I am so lovable, damnit. Pain because Cathy had just been dumped. Desire because what she wanted more than anything else was a life partner with whom she could share a home. It is the simplest of bourgeois desires, expressed in a way true to Cathy's passion for the leather community. Self-Por
trait is an image of defiance.

A few months later, Cathy makes an accompanying self-portrait.

A painter, a mother, from Philadelphia is visiting the 1996 Whitney Biennial. Her name is Julie Ruble. Julie is mostly interested in seeing new paintings. But when she walks past a photograph titled Pevert, she stops and turns to the friend with whom she is seeing the show. "This is a really exciting and wonderful image," Julie told him. "It is unlike anything I've ever seen before. It's not about a freak show, just these people and their strength and their support." Exactly what you might expect someone to say in a museum, except...
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what Julie sees is a woman wearing leather pants, naked above the waist but for a leather hood, a collar, a ring in her right nipple, 46 ten-gauge steel needles in her arms, and the word "pervet" cut into her chest, just above her breasts. While hooded, her head is up, she's looking right at the camera. Get this America: This is me. I'm a leather dyke. I'm strong—she wore that leather hood that scarred the pia out of me. I'm lovable—a dozen friends loved me enough to give me what I wanted: the needles, the cutting, and that hood. I'm human—this is who I am, take it or leave it.

This image, of a pervert, is wonderful and exciting.

To Julie? Context, context.

By the mid '90s, gay America was changing. A cocktail of new drugs was slowing deaths from AIDS, allowing individual energy and community focus to be tunneled into comfortable bourgeois interests. Gay ghettos were out, gay assimilation was in. Cathy's photography, notably the series of lesbian couples in mainstream America settings—a couple floating in their swimming pool, a photograph of a washer and dryer in the home of a lesbian couple that Cathy refers to as a "lesbian washer and dryer"—reflects this trend. But still, the elimination of community history irked Cathy. A new generation of leaders took over the gay-equity movement. Mostly women, they pretended that the leather community didn't exist and insisted that all gay people were just AYSO (American Youth Soccer Organization) moms.

When the gay-equity movement welcomed itself into America's mainstream by holding a huge march on Washington in 1993, Cathy watched with a mixture of pride and anger. This is, "we are family—leather people get the fuck out," she thought to herself. These people on the stage are telling me that they're normal and that leather people are not.

Angry, Cathy prepared to photograph herself. She visited San Francisco's widest leather store, Mr. S, to pick out a hood for the photograph. She invited a dozen people over, and asked the leather community's premier body artist, Raelyn Galina, to do the cutting. Two other friends did the needle play. Everyone had a really good time.

Back in Philadelphia, and for years afterward, Julie Burleigh put Pervet, Trash, and Catherine Opie in the back of her mind and continued dating men. Then, in 2000, when Julie finally met Cathy when both were teaching at Washington University, Julie thought of those photographs. When Cathy flirtatiously flexed her biceps and told Julie to peel her muscle, Julie remembered the strength in those pictures. A few months later, their relationship was cemented. Even when you don't expect it, pictures build community.

There is so much right now. Two days after Professor Opie resumes classes at UCLA, Cathy's first solo show since 2002 opens in Los Angeles, New York, and London. Then Oliver turns two. Then a Robert Mapplethorpe show, curated by Cathy, opens in Los Angeles. Then the Whitney Biennial, in which Cathy will be included for the first time since Julie saw Pervet, opens.

Remember that perfect lawn in Sandusky? The lawn at the Opie-Burleigh home in Los Angeles is Cathy's responsibility. She asked for it. Right now, it's a torn-up mess. "I feel in some ways that I don't know where I exist," Cathy says.

In a way, you understand. How does someone simultaneously call leather, queer, family, art, and academia home? Family and art interacted when Oliver sees a camera and yells, "Nost." Involvement in the leather community, which was so instrumental in helping the Artist find fame and sex for much of her adult life, has receded into the background, replaced by the three things Cathy has always wanted: a partner, a child, and a car seat. In achieving the bourgeois dream, Cathy feels like she doesn't exist anywhere because she exists in so many places.

Maybe that explains the new work, pictures of surfers adrift in the ocean. The surfers, traditional Californian symbols of bohemian freedom, are trapped, floating in the ocean as they hope for a wave. They are living the life they want, but they can't define exactly what they want to do—surf—every minute.

But even as Cathy says she doesn't know where she exists, she lets us in on a little secret: Remember how Cathy has always told us who she is by taking self-portraits at pivotal times in her life? Remember how those self-portraits have stood as markers in Cathy's life and as indicators of contemporary life in gay America? Cathy has made a new self-portrait.

Hardly anyone has seen this self-portrait. It is Cathy past and present. Cathy is again nude from the waist up. Cathy is again backed by drapery evocative of an old master painting. The Pervet cutting has healed into a white, raised, readable scar. Cathy is older now, her skin is a little rougher. In her arms—she's so strong—is Oliver, nursing. With wide blue eyes, Oliver looks up at mom. Mom looks down at Oliver. She's so human.

Catherine Opie's work can be seen as part of the Whitney Biennial 2004, March 11—May 11.

Top: Catherine Opie, 80, 1994. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles