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Review: Catherine Opie reveals a remarkable range at Regen Projects

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Given the extraordinary range of Catherine Opie's subject matter over the last 20 years — from Southern California freeways to Minnesota ice houses, the streets of Washington on President Obama's first inauguration to the interior of Elizabeth Taylor's home, the fierce figure of performance artist Ron Athey to American high school football players — what's most striking initially about her recent work at Regen Projects is how closely it recalls the portraits that first made her name in the 1990s.

Here, as then, she photographs friends and acquaintances, many of them tattooed or otherwise self-distinguished, in a classical manner against a solid, monochromatic ground. Here, as then, the effect is frank and tender, betraying an astute commitment to the beauty and dignity of the individual.

Ultimately, however, the differences are even more striking than the similarities, revealing as they do the maturity, even wisdom, to accrue in the intervening years, in the career of this exceptionally hard-working artist.

PHOTOS: Arts and culture in pictures by The Times

While the early portraits, like most of her portraits since, focused on a particular slice of society — lesbians in drag, or members of the San Francisco S&M community — these encompass a pointedly undifferentiated swath, with individuals ranging from childhood to old age.

The classical references are almost blatantly overt, with each figure posed like a 17th century European aristocrat against a deep, velvet black ground. In the hands of a less accomplished photographer, the effect would very likely be corny. In this case, however, by whatever combination of emotional sincerity and formal facility, the effect is just the opposite: resonant, elegant and moving.

Opie has always been in close correspondence with the history of photography, but these works seem to reach beyond the scope of that particular medium into the wellspring of humanness that feeds art as a whole. The best of the portraits — such as two that depict the artist Lawrence Weiner — call to mind the paintings of Velasquez or Rembrandt.

In the show the portraits are paired with an untitled series of large, out of focus landscapes that touch the same note of universality. The first to confront the viewer, alongside one of the Weiner portraits in the front lobby of the gallery, is a 40-by-60 inch print encompassing a view of the stars in the night sky, posted as if to delineate the scale of Opie's ambitions from the outset.

Viewed in the context of a still very vibrant career trajectory, the new show reveals Opie's command of a remarkable range. Having long utilized the power of photography to bear witness to the crucially specific — as in the early S&M portraits — she moves here as if toward a grasp of the ineffable.

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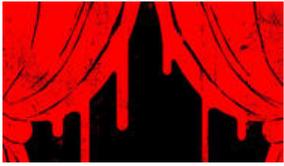
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Regen Projects, 6750 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 276-5424, through March 29. Closed Sunday and Monday. regenprojects.com

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