



Catherine Opie

Documenting Home By Catherine Opie

Let me introduce myself. I am an artist whose medium is photography. I first picked up a camera when I was nine years old and announced to my parents that I wanted to be a documentary photographer. A documentary photographer is someone who documents life around them, or specific subjects, such as people, places or things. In my work I choose both people and places because I feel it best describes what I think about. I live close to the University of Southern California in South Central Los Angeles and a few years ago did a body of work called *In and Around Home* in which I photographed my neighborhood and its surrounding areas for a little over a year. I believe that a photograph can really speak to one's own personal life, and that both the personal and political are interwoven in my interests in representing these ideas photographically. A photograph has the possibility of both being personal and political in creating meanings through seeing with a camera.

My activity for you is five basic assignments that will help you think about what it is to document your own lives.

Assignment #1

With whatever camera you have available (even a cell phone) take a portrait of yourself that can convey something to a viewer that they usually don't think about when it comes to your personality.

Assignment #2

Take portraits of all the members of your family that you would be interested in making portraits of. Ask yourself, how do I want to picture these people? Does a portrait always have to represent people smiling, or are there other ways people can look in portraits?

Activity Summary

Topic: Photographing home and environment

Suitable for

- Intermediate level
- Advanced level

Suggested media

- Photography

Assignment #3

Make images of your home without family members. How do you describe your home through images? What can photographs of your favorite objects convey to viewers? Do you have favorite places in your home that you always look at?

Assignment #4

Make images of your neighborhood. These can be of friends, places, events, and architecture. How do you look at your neighborhood and what is interesting to you? How does lighting and time of day change your photograph? Look at the way light works in your neighborhood; morning, mid-day, and evening all have different qualities of light.

Assignment #5

Invite people to look at the images you have made of people, places, and things and talk about the photographs. What do they see? Do they tell a story or are they just a collection of images? How has your relationship to making images changed in thinking about what you photograph?

Thanks, and good luck with making images. Creating art is always a very powerful way to express yourself.

Last suggestion, have a family day at one of the many museums in your city and talk about what you see with one another.

About Catherine Opie

Artist's Work



Oliver in a Tutu, Catherine Opie, 2004. C-print, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm). © Catherine Opie. Photo courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles



Josh, Catherine Opie, 2007. C-print, 30 x 22 in. (61 x 50.8 cm). © Catherine Opie. Photo courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Artist Biography

Born 1961 in Sandusky, Ohio

Currently lives in Los Angeles, California

Catherine Opie has been interested in social-documentary photography since she was nine years old, when she viewed early 20th-century photographs of child laborers by Lewis Hine. In elementary school, she began photographing her family and local neighborhood. Through her photography, Opie has pursued an ongoing investigation into the identity of people, communities, and cities.

Opie made a name for herself in the early 1990s by documenting a marginalized subculture through color portraits of friends and acquaintances from lesbian and transsexual communities. Around the same time, she started using black-and-white film and an extra-wide-angle panoramic camera to shoot distinct architectural features of Los Angeles, capturing the unique urban identity of the city. Her subjects have since expanded to include freeways, strip malls, gated communities, steel mills, surfers, high school football games, and children. Throughout her work, she presents viewers with the opportunity to redefine their perceptions of identity and community in contemporary America.