



Smithsonian
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**Oral history interview with Catherine Opie, 2012
August 13-27**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Catherine Opie on August 13-27, 2012. The interview took place in Los Angeles, Calif., and was conducted by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Catherine Opie has reviewed the transcript. Corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is Hunter Drohojowska-Philp interviewing Catherine S. Opie, known as Cathy Opie to people who've known her for a while, at the artist's studio in the West Adams District of Los Angeles, California, on August 13, 2012, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one.

Hi, Cathy.

CATHERINE S. OPIE: Hi, Hunter.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'd like to just begin at the beginning. And that means I'd like you to talk to me about, first, when and where were you born.

MS. OPIE: I was born in Sandusky, Ohio, which is northern Ohio, and I was born in the year of 1961, the same as our current president.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What date?

MS. OPIE: April 14, 1961.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how many siblings do you have?

MS. OPIE: I have one older brother, who is a year and four months older than myself. So he was born in January of 1960.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what is his name?

MS. OPIE: His name is Robert, Robert Opie. He lives in San Diego and he's a landscape designer.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what were your parents' names?

MS. OPIE: My father is Bill Monty Opie and my mother—her maiden name was Knight, so she was Mary Louise Knight, but she was always called Louie or Lou. She married my dad—they met in Bowling Green University in Ohio; they both went there—and then she married my dad.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when you say your father is Bill Monty Knight, is Monty a middle name or a nickname?

MS. OPIE: Bill Monty Opie, it's a middle name.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Middle name. Was it Bill or was it William?

MS. OPIE: Bill.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Bill?

MS. OPIE: It was, which is unusual at that time, that it wasn't William; it was a Bill.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay, and what did your father do for living?

MS. OPIE: It was interesting. I mean, I think that a lot of the arts come from what my father did for living. He went to Bowling Green and got his Bachelor's and Master's in business. And he went home basically to run the family business, which was called Opie Craft. And Opie Craft was a small manufacturing company in Sandusky, Ohio, that was started by my grandfather and his brother, Earl, and they made basswood boxes. But in the beginning, they were working with Prang Crayons, and my grandfather—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Prang.

MS. OPIE: Prang, yes, P-R-A-N-G. And they started experimenting with the idea of home décor back in, I would say, '30s and '40s. They would draw these amazing pieces on linen, and then people would color them in on their own with crayons, and then they would use a hot iron with wax paper over it to let it settle. So that was the beginning of Opie Craft, actually working with Prang Crayons on these kind of ideas before coloring and what it is to make work and self-decorate one's home. And then went into basswood boxes and plaques with decoupage and all of that kind of stuff during the big arts and crafts movement.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So do you think that your grandfather and his brother created impulses that drove this industry and that those impulses came down to you genetically?

MS. OPIE: It's always a question of genetics, right? I think there are a lot of really creative people in my family, on the Opie side as well as on my mom's side, but more on the Opie side. And I think that probably being influences—with both my uncle being a painter, his younger brother—he was the oldest of three.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Your father was the oldest of three.

MS. OPIE: Oldest of three.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And his brother wound up being a painter.

MS. OPIE: Yes, he's a painter, and my uncle—his youngest brother, Uncle Jim, James Opie—is one of the foremost knowledgeable people on Middle Eastern tribal rugs in the world. And so I grew up in this family that always had great stories and always traveled a lot and always had things to look at and think about, and then with my father owning an arts and craft company with my grandfather, there were endless amounts of art supplies in the house.

So there was never a kind of moment of, Well, no, you can't make that. It was before cable TV, so there were only three channels on the television, so you actually did sit in the house on a rainy or cold winter day and just make watercolor after watercolor.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're saying your other uncle was a painter, or is also James?

MS. OPIE: No, that's John—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: John.

MS. OPIE: John Opie.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And John was what kind of painter?

MS. OPIE: I don't know if he would describe himself this way, but I would describe him completely out of the Ashcan movement of painting. He still paints, and he paints every day. And my aunt, his wife, is a sculptor. I would go and visit them when I was a kid in Pennsylvania. They had four children, my cousins. And I would just be completely enamored by their lives, because they were living these kind of artist-bohemian lives, in a certain way. And I was very impressed with that in a certain way, and just really liked looking at them and what they made.

I remember my grandparents having original work all over the house. They were very much a part of the Sandusky artist scene. They had friends who were artists who were actually making work as artists, and so I grew up in both my own house and my grandparents' house with Midwestern artists' work around. I didn't grow up with modern art in that way of like what was happening in New York and that kind of art world, but there was always a lot of landscape paintings, actually, by this painter by the name of George Koch.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How do you spell that last name?

MS. OPIE: K-O-C-H.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: They were really good friends with my grandparents, and I grew up around that a little bit, and I think that that always was interesting. It gave me a little bit of permission to think about being an artist.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that started very early for you, I understand.

MS. OPIE: Yes, I asked for a camera for my ninth birthday. I had written a report about Lewis Hine, and I wasn't a very good student. I didn't understand the world through words, even though I was an avid reader. Even though I completely was obsessed with books and my face was always in a book, I really began to, at an early age, began to kind at the world in relationship to—I guess it's ideas of being represented, or creating representations of that.

So I asked for a camera when I was nine because Lewis Hine's photographs of the children in the South Carolina mills working just totally affected me when I saw them in my school textbook. I couldn't believe that kids that young were working in these mills. And even though I could read the words in my textbook, it really was the image that became this profound realization for me of just what that image did.

And I went home and said, "I want to be a documentary photographer, and can I have a camera for my birthday?"

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How old were you then?

MS. OPIE: I was eight, so it was going to be for my ninth birthday.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And where were you in school at that point?

MS. OPIE: Public school, elementary school, in Sandusky, Ohio.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What was that called?

MS. OPIE: It was probably called Furry—F-U-R-R-Y—Elementary School. Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] You can hardly help laugh[ing] at that.

MS. OPIE: I know. It was good. Back then in Ohio, it was really interesting because the public school system was kind of incredible. It was a little bit experimental. I think that they were bouncing off of the fact that so many of those Midwestern states were so much a part of the Industrial Revolution. And so they built these beautiful Modernist schoolhouses. I remember the brick on the outside and the floor-to-ceiling windows and the open space. And I think all of that, in terms of—it still affects my design sense to this day.

But it was this early introduction to Modernist architecture, to a certain extent. I remember being very visually taken by it all; I always was very aware of all my surroundings. I remember the furniture of my best friend's house when she was a kid. I have very strong visual memories of all of this. And yes, the elementary school was this really cool modern elementary school that was—the principal was actually from India.

I remember going to his office, and it smelled like rich chocolate and spices. He was very involved in the idea of bringing the community to the school and just—[it] was very unusual in the middle of this small town in the Midwest to have a principal from India.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Very.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I would think. Especially because it was in Sandusky, Ohio.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you grew up in this sort of idyllic way, would you say?

MS. OPIE: In some ways, yes; in other ways, no. That's the weird thing. There was a lot of personal rift in my family and a lot of stuff that was just intense. I think my father had a very hard time working for his [father], ultimately. And so I grew up in what looked like from the outside completely idyllic, but on the inside, there was a lot of intensity.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did your parents get along?

MS. OPIE: My parents got along really well. I never saw them fight. They seemed to like each other.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, what's the trauma then, or what's the difficulty then?

MS. OPIE: Well, I had a very physically abusive older brother.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Your brother.

MS. OPIE: My brother just couldn't leave me alone. He really, he just was very physically abusive to

me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: He would hit you, are you saying?

MS. OPIE: Hit me, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But not sexually abuse you.

MS. OPIE: I don't want to say on tape—so—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay. Okay, all right, Okay.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But so that was problematic.

MS. OPIE: So, yes. It was just intense.

So I grew up in this country club, upper-middle-class Midwestern family; family-owned business. But there was just a lot of intense emotional stuff between my brother and I.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so how long were you at that elementary school? What year did you leave?

MS. OPIE: Well, middle school. I had one year of middle school in Ohio; I think it was called Meadowlawn. And then we moved—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's Meadowlawn.

MS. OPIE: Meadowlawn, yes, like "meadow" and a lawn, all together. [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: These names are amazing, like something Wes Anderson would create.

MS. OPIE: I know. And I was there.

And then my father was diagnosed with cancer. We basically were told that he had six months to live. And at this point, my mother was actually having an affair with somebody at the country club, because my father said, "I'm not going to live very long; I'm the only man you've ever been with, so how about"—did a kind of a swingers thing, but it backfired on him. And then my grandfather sold the company, after my father made it really, really successful, out from under him. So my father's world was collapsing on him completely.

The doctor said, "Well, you should move to a warmer climate. You don't have long to live." And at this point, I think my father just wanted to get the hell out of Sandusky, Ohio, anyway because he was really pretty much—he got screwed by his father after he made the company successful. He was the good older son who came home and made the company successful.

And so we moved—my eighth-grade year was spent in Poway, California, where I then finished middle school and high school.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you finished middle school in Poway, California.

MS. OPIE: Yes. I moved when I was 13.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when did you go to the girls' school?

MS. OPIE: Oh, Virginia Intermont College?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: That was in my first year in college, when I was 20.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Let's stay here. So you've had this kind of amazing Midwestern upbringing. And then you're just brought to—

MS. OPIE: —California.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —California.

MS. OPIE: Which was okay for me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Could be a dream for many people.

MS. OPIE: I think it was okay for me. I needed to leave Ohio. There were things that happened to me in Ohio that weren't good for me anymore. I had a situation in the woods in which a group of Rob's friends gang-raped me. And that was really horrible. And then everybody said that I just would have sex with anybody. And there was just a really—a lot of severe emotional problems that I was facing, without any aid [from] my parents because my parents were in their own crisis.

And so, in a way, because of what was happening socially with me at school and other situations, I felt like I got to have, all of a sudden, a new life and a new identity by coming in California, which was really key, I think, to my own survival. I think that if I had stayed in Ohio, I don't really actually know what would have happened to me on an emotional level.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did your father know what happened to you?

MS. OPIE: My parents kind of knew, but they weren't really able to deal. They sent my brother to a psychiatrist, but they didn't send me to a psychiatrist. At that point, they kind of figured out certain things were happening that were inappropriate with my brother and me as well. And so Rob got to go and talk to somebody. But they didn't really think that the girl here might need to talk to somebody.

And so in California—we moved under very intense circumstances. My father was supposedly dying. I was in this place of emotional hell. I had a camera. I photographed everything. My camera was my way of making friends. I would do portraits of people and then give those portraits to people, and then they would become my friends. It was a very comfortable place for me. I got to spend a lot of time alone and roaming. We moved at a time when Poway was just getting developed. It was still very chaparral. Everybody had horses and it was very undeveloped. It was before major master planned communities were happening. It was just on that edge of master planned growth.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What year did you live there?

MS. OPIE: Oh, '75, I would say.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And where is Poway?

MS. OPIE: Poway is in North County, San Diego. So it's right by Escondido. It's kind of North County, San Diego. It was like I had moved into the middle of a John Wayne movie.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It was very Western.

MS. OPIE: It was very Western. And it was so funny because I would watch Westerns all the time, because I was into horses and I really liked the landscape and the mountains. And I think that generation of kids who grew up in the '60s and the '70s were one of the first generations that actually grew up with TV as a regular thing. You came home from school and you switched on TV, and there were programs that you followed. I don't think my mom's generation, more or less, grew up with the radio and then switched to television.

So we kind of had an unlimited ability to do whatever we wanted to. That was part of the problem as well; we had too much freedom. I would spend my Sunday afternoons watching either Shirley Temple movies or John Wayne movies. Books were a place of transporting me, but also television became another place of transporting me out of my own little life that wasn't quite right.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, you got a camera when you were nine.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how old were you when you went to Poway—13?

MS. OPIE: Thirteen.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So between nine and 13, how did you develop as an artist?

MS. OPIE: Well, I photographed everything around me. It's kind of weird because if you look back at my nine-year-old[s] negatives, they're not that different from what I still look at today. So, I kind of catalogued. I was very into cataloguing and archiving. I would make photographs of every stop sign in the neighborhood, every fire hydrant. I would photograph my cat. I would photograph my Barbie dolls. I would photograph my friends at the country club playing in the water and swimming.

I did a self-portrait, that people now know of me, with a little short haircut and glasses, with flower jeans, and the zipper's half down and I'm making muscles. And I think in a certain way, that's my very first performed portrait, because I was anything but feeling incredibly strong at that moment, but I decided to show myself to me at that point. There was only me, but I wanted myself represented that way, as a strong little girl.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did you take that picture?

MS. OPIE: I set the camera up on the steps.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, on the steps.

MS. OPIE: Yes, it was just on the railing. I balanced it on the railing, and I had a little self-timer on it—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, what kind of camera was this?

MS. OPIE: A Kodak camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It was a basic Kodak—

MS. OPIE: Kodak, but it wasn't an Instamatic Kodak. It was better than an Instamatic. But I don't remember what one it was.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you send the film to a film developer?

MS. OPIE: Yes, at first I did, yes, yes. And then later learned how to do all my own developing. But at first my parents would take it to the drug store and have it developed.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So between nine and 13, the photographs that you took, did you have them returned to you as snapshots?

MS. OPIE: Yes, it was snapshots, and I don't think I have any of the original prints. My brother kept a photo album, but I never kept a photo album. I have the negatives still, but I don't have the prints.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you kept the negatives from those years.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You must have had some sense that they were important?

MS. OPIE: I think I was always good at keeping things. My son has the same problem. [Laughs.] We never want to throw anything away. But yes, I don't know if I thought that they were important, or they were just shoved away and then later discovered and being like, Oh, these are my first images I made with my camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did you have a sense that what you were doing had a connection to making art?

MS. OPIE: No, I don't think I did. I don't think that I thought that I was making art. I think that I thought that I was making photographs because photographs interested me. And yes, I don't even know if photography was really talked about as art. For me, at that time period, being a sculptor or a painter would have been being an artist. It wouldn't have been being a photographer. But I just knew that photography was really important to me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you taking art classes in school?

MS. OPIE: Well, they had art. I painted a lot. I actually really like painting. I'm just not very good at it—probably why I married a painter. She's really good at it. [Laughs.] But yes, I painted all the time. I was always making stuff, constantly making stuff.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you took art classes in school.

MS. OPIE: Yes, they always had art in elementary schools.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you encouraged?

MS. OPIE: Yes, in fact, I would get in the showcase. So often the showcase would be there. I still have funny little things, like my dad was really into Nixon, and I made a papier-mâché Nixon mask for him.

He's a really, actually, a really interesting man. He owned the largest collection of American campaign memorabilia in the country; that's all housed at the Smithsonian now. So I grew up with all the original Lincoln ferrotypes. I think that's part of my connection to history and also learning what

photographs can do. In my house would be the original Lincoln ferrotypes; all of this amazing memorabilia was everywhere. We were photographed, as kids, wearing it for *Ohio Magazine* and things like that. [He] was kind of well known as having an amazing political campaign collection.

So I grew up with an incredible history of America through politics in my house. And I guess that what he collected, more than art, was that—was his collection, his baby.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when the family moved to Poway, what did your father decide to do for a living?

MS. OPIE: Well, all these weird people would come into our house all the time. And he apparently was having transcendental experiences to try to heal himself. I just remember weird people pulling up in an RV. They would have, like, huge boots on and [an] eye patch over their eyes. And they would go up to my dad's office, and they would spend hours in there.

And then, all of a sudden he was better again, and he wasn't going to die, which was really confusing for me because I was kind of like, Oh, okay, my dad's dying. We're living in California, whatever. But according to my father—which I don't know if I ever believe anything he says, because he's a little bit of a pathological liar. Like we don't even actually know if he had cancer, because I asked my mom, "Mom, did you go with him to the Cleveland Clinic for all of his treatments?" And Mom was like, "No, I never did." And so it's really a blur whether or not he had cancer; we're very confused by it.

He might have. [Laughs.] That's—so we were told anyway. But anyway, so apparently, he left his body and was able to clearly see himself, on one of these meditative—leaving his body and then heal his body. This is what the story is.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So he'd had the Southern California experience.

MS. OPIE: He had a Southern California experience, and he was away from his father. After a year of retirement and us waiting for dad to die, he got his real estate license, at a very good time in Southern California. He became, eventually, the head of [the] Realtor Association in San Diego County and then became [an] expert trial guy with real estate. He became a really successful realtor with his own business.

So he was a good businessman. He built my grandfather's business up to be this amazing thing, and then he ended up doing real estate in Southern California.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you come here to Poway, where did you go to school?

MS. OPIE: First, it was from Meadowlawn to Middlebrook. So it was Middlebrook Middle School and then Poway High School.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you were at Middlebrook Middle School at the age of 13.

MS. OPIE: And I was there for only one year because it was eighth-grade year.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that would have been 1976.

MS. OPIE: Yes, '75, '76, I guess. I graduated from high school in '79, so, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then where did you go to high school?

MS. OPIE: Poway High. I photographed Poway High for the football series. And my niece went to Poway High. So, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now you're starting your fresh life here in Southern California, and what was it like for you, having escaped this horrific experience in Ohio?

MS. OPIE: I think that it's hard for me to remember. I think I was fairly checked out, but I was also just trying to live a life. And I spent a lot of hours—and we really wanted a dog, and wanted a dog so bad. And my dad had this horrible habit of—we'd get animals and I'd come home and the animal would be dumped. And so he had this really kind of horrible, cruel thing that we would get attached to an animal and then we'd come home from school one day and there would be no more dog, no animal there. That would be like, "No, we didn't want it anymore."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is getting pretty sad, Cathy. [They laugh.] I don't think I'll make it through.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.] So I really wanted a dog. I really wanted a dog so badly. I'm such dog person. But I couldn't have a dog. No dogs are allowed. So I started dog-walking in the neighborhood. I was always very resourceful. I had a lot of little businesses when I was a kid. In Ohio, little scrap wood that couldn't be made into basswood boxes and plaques, I would chop in the back of my little patio/screened-in porch in the wintertime with my little gloves, on and I'd put it in brown paper bags, and I'd sell it with my wagon door-to-door for a dollar a bag for kindling.

And so I was always really—I knew how to make things happen, like I had enterprises. I had interest in business. My dad really instilled that in us. We would go on Sundays to the factory and we'd work for him. And every keychain we'd put into a key thing, he would give us a penny for. Every cork in the salt and pepper shaker—wooden salt and pepper shakers—we would get a penny for it. So I was like, Okay, I'm going to make some money here.

So I started dog-walking this dog, and it's so funny that my—the dog's name was Oliver. It's not that I named my son after this dog. I think I realized it later, that I named him after a dog that I really loved. It was a black standard poodle. And I just knocked on this woman's door after I saw her dog, and I was like, "Oh, your dog is so pretty." I said, "I go walking every day out in the chaparral and I take really long hikes. Do you want me to start walking your dog for you?" And she was like, "Well, yes." And so I would come home every day after school, and I'd go up—and she gave me a key to her condominium—and I'd get Oliver out of the condominium, and then we would just go off. It was miles and miles of chaparral, just like a John Wayne movie. There were big rocks to climb up on. There were rocks that had full beehives in it. There was—and all of a sudden, you come to this big cactus garden. I figured out how to take the prickles off the cacti, and I would sit there and eat it. And I was living this really happy internal world with this beautiful standard poodle as my dog and hiking, just hiking.

I was really happy. And my brother was leaving me alone. He was still kind of being an asshole, but he was better, because he was, I think at that point, probably off smoking pot with his friends, and he was more of a teenager, and I wasn't in his way as much. And I was very good at making myself invisible. So I was like, Okay, I'm just off in this world.

My mom was utterly depressed and just playing tennis and golf all the time. And my dad was trying to heal himself. So I was like, Okay, I'm just—nobody was tracking me.

At this point, my mom had already decided that she wasn't going to cook anymore either for us. So

it was, Fix your own, whatever you wanted; she would do the grocery shopping, but you just make your own meals. So it was a very weird upper-middle-class growing up. That's why, on the outside, it was this Norman Rockwell total thing. But on the inside, it was pure chaos.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're still taking pictures with your camera?

MS. OPIE: No, I wasn't. I wasn't taking any pictures.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So after you moved to Poway, you stopped taking pictures.

MS. OPIE: I stopped taking pictures. And then I broke Oliver's heart, this standard poodle, because there was a woman down the street named Bridget. I was riding my skateboard down the street—because I got really into skateboarding. And I was riding it down the street and I see this woman painting this dog with spray paint. I stop—and I'm about probably 13 and a half, 14—I'm like, "What are you doing? Why are you painting your dog?" I knew she had two big Great Danes. And she goes, "I'm not. It's a statue of a dog. I'm going to put it in my front yard. It's made of plaster." And I was like, "Oh." And so then I just started talking to her, and then she became my surrogate mother.

So I left Oliver, the standard poodle. The owner told me that I broke the dog's heart. And I started walking Roxanne, the Great Dane. So Roxanne, the Great Dane, went on all the great adventures with me. And the owner of Oliver said, "Listen, you can't actually walk by the window anymore with another dog. It's just sending this dog into"—and I felt so bad, but this dog comes with a person who's looking after me, and I was always very good at finding other families to take care of me.

So in Ohio, I had the Barenklau family.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What's it called?

MS. OPIE: They were called the Barenklau. I just recently got a letter from them. It was sweet. Because of my piece that I did at the Cleveland Clinic. They went and saw it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How do you spell their name?

MS. OPIE: Barenklau, how would you spell it? B-A-R-E-N-K-L-A-U, maybe, something like that. Gary and Betsy. And they had a dog. And I walked their dog. [They laugh.] They had an Irish setter named Ginger. And so I find these surrogate families through dogs that I desire.

And so I was kind of taking care of myself.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Interesting.

MS. OPIE: I was very good at it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What's the name of the Great Dane's owner?

MS. OPIE: Bridget.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Bridget what?

MS. OPIE: You know what, I don't remember Bridget's last name. It was Drew. I mean, she was married to Drew, so it was Bridget Drew.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so how did she take care of you? How did she become your

surrogate mother?

MS. OPIE: She cooked for me, because there was [only] fix-your-own. So I kind of went around to different neighbors' houses most nights and would get a hot meal. It sounds so weird. It's not like I needed it financially. I just needed somebody to take care of me on an emotional level as well as just track me. I wasn't being tracked by my own parents. And so they would always have an amazing meal, and I would help her out with everything in the house. So I became her little 14-year-old slave. But not slave, because she was loving to me. I would vacuum. I'd take the dog for a walk.

And then she became pregnant. I always have been the number-one babysitter wherever I went. So that's the other thing that I do for money, as I'm the greatest babysitter in the neighborhood. And so I start taking care of Monique; her daughter, who I'm still in touch with, is amazing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: During this time, you'd be going to classes at Poway High School?

MS. OPIE: Going to classes at Poway High.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you taking art classes?

MS. OPIE: I am taking ceramics and I'm taking painting, but I'm failing. I'm failing miserably.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And this is the first time your grades were failing.

MS. OPIE: Yes. California was a big switch for me. I would struggle a little bit in school, but I always had people that were backing me. And this was—there was no backing. There was no parental. There was no, Do you have homework? There was nothing. There was just silence in my house—just utter, depressive silence.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So did you manage to graduate from your classes, though, or did you get put back?

MS. OPIE: Barely, barely. Never got put back. But barely. I graduated—and this is the big joke among my high school friends, is that I'm a professor. They can't believe it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: They laugh. They're hilarious. Like, as one of their kids is doing badly at school, they say, "It's okay; look at Cathy Opie. It's all okay." When I got the teaching job at Yale, my good buddy Bruce Edelstein from high school was on the phone saying, "Rachel, it's okay; Cathy Opie is a professor at Yale," like, "You're going to be fine." [They laugh.]

So yes, so Bridget took good care of me and I saved up all my babysitting money. And I bought a Nikkormat FT3 when I was 15—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What is that?

MS. OPIE: It was a Nikon camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay. Would you spell that for me?

MS. OPIE: Nikkormat. N-I-K-K-O-R-M-A-T FT3. And I get back into photography. She sends me down to—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you're 15 years old?

MS. OPIE: I'm 14 or 15, probably 15, and utterly fall back in love with it. And I'm not taking photography classes yet at Poway High, but I'm just, yes, I'm utterly in love with photography. She sends me down with her to the San Diego Convention Center, and we do a weekend Nikon photography workshop that teaches us how to use everything with the camera. So I become relentless with the camera again.

And at this point I'm in high school. It's my sophomore year. I don't really have any friends. I was a jock. I was a swimmer, but I quit swim team. I didn't tell my mom that I quit swim team, because she was a PE teacher, so she's an intense jock. She was always the champion of whatever team at whatever country club we belonged to. We were a sport family. We did sports.

So I don't tell anybody that I quit swim team, and then I'm really just at Bridget's house all the time. And my mom starts getting a little bit jealous of Bridget. She's kind of aware now that there's another person that's kind of replaced her a little bit. But she's still pretty checked out. So Bridget lived across the street from me, which made it very convenient. We move when I'm 15.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh.

MS. OPIE: We move up to a bigger, better house in Green Valley Highlands. That's this house that has this incredible view. My mom is building her dream pool in the backyard. It's got quite a bit of land, with manzanita trees, and we're surrounded by avocado groves. So the only way for me to go and hang out with Bridget is to ride my bike over there, which is down a really steep hill, and then she would often bring me home. So Bridget and I separate a little bit.

And at this point in time, I meet Steve Rexrode, who's still one of my best friends. He was in drama at Poway High. And so I started hanging out with all the drama kids and I'm photographing all the plays.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're now about 16?

MS. OPIE: I'm 15, yes. I get a car at 16. So at 15, I figured out how to get away for the summers from my family. I called the YMCA on my own, because I was so good with kids. And I get myself a junior counselor position at Camp Marston. And so I get to go away now for the summers. I'm gone three months.

So it's either home for school and then I'm gone. And then Bridget moves—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And where's this summer camp?

MS. OPIE: Up in Julian—Julian, California, up in the Cuyamacas. And I'm a good camp counselor. I'm good at it. And so by 16, I'm not even a junior counselor anymore; I'm a full counselor the next summer. By 17, I'm pretty much almost running the camp.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: By 18, the YMCA offered to send me to college to be a recreation director. So they were like, "Why don't you get a degree in this? You're very good in this. You seem like this is what your calling is." But at that point, I'm still doing photography. I'm making photographs. I have my own darkroom set up in my house. And I'm making friends by photographing the plays. And then going home at night, developing the film, and then printing eight-by-10 glossies and bringing it back the

next day to school and giving them to people.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: And people start liking me. Then I have a party at my house. This was the turning point. I was like, Okay, now I'm having best friends. I'm having my first real—since my Ohio friends—my new best friends in the drama department.

So Steve Rexrode and I are sitting on my front porch—in the stairs of my house—and Bridget has made little finger sandwiches, and she's done all the food for the party because she wants me to have a successful high school experience. So she's done all the food, which again makes my mom a little jealous. But my mom doesn't say this.

And so Bridget's really excited. She's left me. And my parents are who knows where, but I'm having my first party. I never even had a birthday party; my mom just never had a birthday party for me.

My mom's a really good woman. By the way, I really love my mom. [They laugh.] I'd like to interject that at this point that I'm very close to my mom. And she feels extremely guilty about my childhood. [Laughs.]

But so the party goes really well. Steve thought nobody would come, but everybody came; like everybody came. And I had a really kind of swanky house. We had three-story, split level '70s house with a swimming pool and a pool table, and we had like—it was kind of a cool house. And so then I became—which is not like the cool kids at Poway High, but I became a cool kid in the drama department. So I take interest in pictures. I'm funny. I have friends. I'm 16. I get my car. I become the one who drives everybody everywhere.

I'm babysitting. I make money. I'm the one who buys everybody pizza. I ended up probably overcompensating with generosity because I so badly wanted to be accepted. So a lot of my friendships, I felt like it was really trying hard to almost—buying friendships in a certain way, but not really aware that that's what I was doing. I figured that out years later in therapy.

And life is really good.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, could you please spell Steve Rexrode's name, the last name?

MS. OPIE: Yes. R-E-X-R-O-D-E.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: R-O-D-E

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And now, do you have boyfriends or girlfriends at this stage of your life?

MS. OPIE: I don't have a boyfriend, but I'm madly in love with one woman, and her name is Se'ré Flack. And I don't know I'm in love with her. She just becomes my best friend who I'd do anything for. I'd grow roses. She loves roses; I plant roses. I make really beautiful roses. I bring her a rose every day at the school

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How do you spell her name?

MS. OPIE: Seře is S-E-R-E, and then it has an accent over the R. And Flack is F-L-A-C-K. She is the most beautiful, most amazing actress at our school. Everybody had a crush on Seře; everybody was utterly in love with Seře.

But I became her best friend. But she became a little bit too religious for me, and she got a boyfriend. So then I switched my best friend to Jenny Howard, which was more after high school—my senior year and after high school, Jenny and I became inseparable.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: J-E-N-N-Y and Howard.

MS. OPIE: J-E-N-N-Y Howard, H-O-W-A-R-D.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, were these friends, or were they lovers?

MS. OPIE: Jenny, I have my first lesbian experience with, which was my first time making out, yes, and kissing her. But we didn't actually know how to do anything else but that. But [I] remember being utterly in love with her. But the next day, she wouldn't even acknowledge it. But we still ended up just being super, super close.

Nobody really talks about being gay. We knew that Tom Murray and John Carroll from drama liked each other and were having an affair. But there wasn't any kind of examples of lesbians on campus, except for the really intense jock girls in basketball, who could hurt you. [They laugh.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So what year is this when you're in your senior year in high school?

MS. OPIE: Nineteen seventy-nine—'78, '79.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So being gay wasn't unknown. You knew what being gay was.

MS. OPIE: Knew what being gay was, but it wasn't really acceptable. And I tried kind of to have a boyfriend. It's really funny because I saw these high school friends just recently, and I hadn't seen them since high school. There was this one guy, Danny Ingersoll. We would go to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* together and we would make out. But there was just something about it that I couldn't fully go into it. I would make out with him, but then I was just—didn't really want to be his girlfriend, because I knew that I have feelings for these other friends.

And then, yes, I never had a boyfriend, never had a boyfriend. I was going to go to prom with Glenn Pearl, but Glenn Pearl moved away right before prom happened. So I didn't go to my senior prom. I was trying to figure out how I would go in a dress and heels anyway, because I so wasn't a dress person. I was definitely butch. I kind of wear white overalls every day in my—I had a uniform for school. And my last year at school was very much white overalls almost every day. Camp counselor uniform as well.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] But did you know what it was that you were feeling?

MS. OPIE: Not really. I was a little confused anyway, because I was a little messed up because of being sexually abused. And so I was a little confused about what any of that felt like or what I was supposed to be feeling. So yes, it was really confusing for me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you couldn't talk—did you talk about it with your mother at all?

MS. OPIE: Not really, no. No, actually my mom, when I came out, was the last person I told. I told my father first.

They divorced when I was 16, as well.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay, let's back up a little bit.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So—

MS. OPIE: So even though I'm happy—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —in the midst of—the big house is just your mother's house?

MS. OPIE: No, it's my father and my mother's house. I'm really happy. I'm happy for the first time in my life. I just feel really okay. I feel like I'm doing well in this world. And then, right before Christmas, my parents announced that they were getting divorced.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Christmas of what year?

MS. OPIE: Well, when I was 16, so what? Christmas of '77.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: Probably '76, '77. So my parents tell us that they're getting divorced. Never heard them fight. We never knew that this was happening. We thought they came to California; they'd figured out their stuff. I never really knew my mom was having an affair until later on when I was an adult.

So this is how my father divorces my mother. My father divorces my mother kind of like how he dumps our dogs. He went and he bought her a condominium, and he drove her to it. And he said, "This is where you'll be living from now on."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, dear.

MS. OPIE: Yes. [Laughs.] So literally, my mom moves out, and she doesn't really try to stay in touch. She went back school. She went back to school to get her physical therapist degree because she knew that she needed to make a living for herself, that she has X amount of money that my dad gave her. My dad has the house. He has us kids. He decides that he needs a new life and a new wife. So he marries somebody that he met I don't even know where. Her name is George. And she moves in with us with her son—her 13-year-old son, Jeff.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What year is this?

MS. OPIE: This is my 16th year. And I have finally my own dog that my mom had my dad get me, this beautiful German shepherd named Gretchen, who went everywhere with me. So she would just be with me and my friends. My dog went everywhere with me.

So Bridget is—I still keep tabs on Bridget and I'm still going there and I still spend the night sometime and I'm still taking care of Monique, her baby. But I have my own life now; I'm embodying my own life where I don't need a grownup to watch after me.

So they divorce—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Your parents divorced—

MS. OPIE: My parents divorced. George moves in.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This new woman, who is what kind of woman?

MS. OPIE: Turns out that she was a psychopath. That she was utterly, utterly crazy. She made my dad sell the house that I was really happy in, and we moved to this house overlooking the golf course that was much smaller. It didn't have land. And I went away one summer to camp and I came home and my dog was gone. They decided that they couldn't take care of my dog, that my dog wasn't doing well. So my dad went and dumped my dog.

So I'm fucked again, just flat.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is the worst childhood I've ever heard. This is like Dickens. [They laugh.] Someone's going to be crying at the Archives when they transcribe this.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.] So I'm pretty bummed. I'm pretty out of it. I'm hanging with my friends from high school because they're keeping me going; they're my core group. They don't know my whole history or anything like that, but they just know that they're utterly scared of my brother. They know that there's something not right there. So they're just keeping me going.

And meanwhile, George gets progressively craz[er]. And my dad starts having an affair with my mom.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: So he's having an affair with my mom because he has to figure out how to get rid of George. Yes, George was horrible.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So he got rid of George?

MS. OPIE: Got rid of George, and my mom moved out after Christmas. And so she was back home in the new house before Christmas.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] That's fantastic. But by this time you're almost ready to go to college.

MS. OPIE: Almost.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: All right.

MS. OPIE: But I don't go to college right away.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What happens after you graduate from high school; 1979, you graduate?

MS. OPIE: I get a job immediately with the Orange County Department of Education. I work up in the mountains, up in Forest Falls, California, teaching riparian forestry. So I'm a full-time camp counselor. Every week a sixth-grade group comes in, and I'm their cabin person. And then I work with them on hiking and all of that stuff. They get their—it's when public schools still have money, and they wanted kids from the city to go experience nature.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: So I did that and then I kind of left and I got fired—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That was a full-time job.

MS. OPIE: It was full-time job, living in camp full-time.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how much money did you make in your first full-time job?

MS. OPIE: Oh, boy, gosh, that's a really good question. Probably nothing, like, what, maybe—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Approximately.

MS. OPIE: I don't even remember what my paychecks were. Maybe \$150 a week.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: Because they paid for your room and board, too.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But here you're working full-time—

MS. OPIE: Working full-time, and I had been making money as a camp counselor at camp, too. I had still been babysitting. And I started selling my photographs and doing other theater things. So people were buying my photographs, for a dollar, an eight by 10.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The black-and-white glossies.

MS. OPIE: The black-and-white glossies.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

MS. OPIE: I gave them away at first, and then I was like, No, I'm going to sell them. So I started photographing community theater in San Diego, around Escondido and stuff, and then getting hired for that, and then actually giving them prints and selling prints to the cast members.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Right. And so—[inaudible]—camping thing, how many years did you do that?

MS. OPIE: The sixth grade camp was the end, and it ended badly for me. I was having a little bit of an emotional breakdown. There was this one woman there who I really respected named Marge, and I really wanted her to accept me, but I was just being weird. I was being probably a little bit messed up. One day, I just started talking in a British accent. And she's like, "What are you doing?" And I'm like, "I've always had this accent." A little crazy.

It all got triggered by an abusive guy. He came in yelling at my cabin of girls. He was a teacher, one of the sixth grade teachers. The girls were crying. And that freaked me out. I wasn't capable of dealing with that. I got really sick, and I got the measles. And after I got the measles, I just quit the job and I didn't go back. So then I got a job in a photo shop. I worked in a photo store.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That must have been by 1980, '81?

MS. OPIE: Yes, 1980, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what was the name of the photo shop?

MS. OPIE: RB Photo. For Rancho Bernardo. They were really nice. They were great. I was the front counter person. I was good at sales, and I knew what I was talking about with photography. So I worked there till I went to college, at 20, so for a year and a half. And then I said, I need to go to school. I need to figure out what I'm doing with my life.

At this point, my parents were divorced again. They got remarried, and they divorced again. And I'm living with my mother in a condominium. My brother has joined the military and he's in the Air Force. He's gone. And so my mom and I are having a really nice time together; I'm feeling like I'm really being mothered here. And I tell her that I need to get an education, and she agrees.

I graduated from high school with a 2.0 grade point average. So there wasn't much possibility for me to get into any good universities. So I'm researching in the Peterson College Guide that I get from the library, and I pull this school out of my hat called Virginia Intermont College—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Virginia what?

MS. OPIE: Virginia Intermont, I-N-T-E-R-M-O-N-T—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

MS. OPIE: —College. I apply and I get in, even though I have to take remedial math and remedial reading classes. My major is early childhood education. But they have photo, and I take photography too. I really have a good time there—really happy.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is a women's college?

MS. OPIE: First year that they accepted men. So, was only 18 guys to, like, 400 women, something like that, very small college right on the border of Virginia. So it was Virginia and it was Bristol. So, what was the town—you would walk across the street and you'd be in—I don't know. What borders it?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What state does it border?

MS. OPIE: It's Bristol, Virginia, but it's literally, like the street, you would walk across and you'd be in another state, Tennessee? Yes. Bristol, Tennessee and Virginia, so the same.

It's a beautiful college. It's one of those red-brick Virginia colleges. And my mom flies with me and settles me into my dorm room. And I am free. I'm going to school, and I'm getting straight As, and I made the honor roll. And things are better for me. Things are really good again. I'm making friends, and I start doing hallucinogens and experimenting with other girls, not in terms of sex, but drugs. I had already smoked pot in high school, but I had one girl across the way from me who was really into acid. I think that I started psychologically—what you do sometimes on hallucinogenics is going really internal—and figuring some stuff out about myself, just feeling like, Okay, like I need to really figure out my life here.

And then for Thanksgiving, my dad is dating his old high school sweetheart from Sandusky, Ohio.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: I know. This is like a novel, right? It's crazy.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You couldn't make this up.

MS. OPIE: So he's dating this wonderful woman, Eleanor Schnurr, who's a painter and an artist, and it was his high school sweetheart. She wants to do a portrait of me to give to my dad. So I go to New York City and I stay with her and she draws me and we talk. She's a wonderful woman. She is basically the person who we get to applaud for having me change my direction in my life.

So we're talking and she's looking at my photographs and she says, "You know, you're really good."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: And nobody had said that, because in high school, my photo teacher would rip up my photos in front of the class and say that I would never be a photographer, that I wasn't good enough.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Why?

MS. OPIE: I don't know. He was mean. He was just mean. He never told me why. He was just a mean person, would actually humiliate me in front of the entire class.

So I always did this photo thing as a hobby, because it never seemed like I could be it, because my dad had me become a junior realtor to get my real estate license to have something to fall back on, even though I loved photography. My mom wanted me to be a kindergarten teacher because I was so good with kids and I had so much experience, so that made sense for a career. But nobody ever said, "Why don't you be an artist?" Not my uncle, my aunts, nobody.

But Eleanor Schnurr says it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How do you spell Eleanor's last name?

MS. OPIE: S-C-H-N-U-R-R. She's an Ashcan painter, too. She's a good painter. She has a website and stuff but—and I keep track of her.

So she says, "Your photographs are really good. What are you doing with your life? What do you want to be? Do you really want to be a kindergarten teacher?" And I said, "Well, I'm really good with kids. I've had a lot of experience at this point. I'm good with them. But no, I don't really want to"—I said, "I want to be a photographer."

I'd been wanting to be a photographer since high school. And I looked into Brooks early on, to go to Brooks Photography, to keep going there, but it was too expensive. My mom said she couldn't afford it. And then I was thinking about being a cinema photographer because I loved film so much. But then I looked at the statistics of women in that field at that time period, in like 1978, when I was researching and realized that, No, I could never do that.

So I kind of just said, Well, that's a male field. I'll be a teacher and I'll just do photography. But Eleanor told me, for those many hours I sat for her, while we were doing this portrait, she said, "I think you're an artist, and I think that you need to get out of that school in Virginia. You need to move to a major city, and you need to go to art school." And I was like, "Oh, really?"

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: And she was like, “Yes, that’s actually what you need to do.” And I’d be like, “Oh, oh, okay.” Okay, “Sure, that seems reasonable to me.”

So I go and I go back to my dorm room. And at that point, they don’t have phones in dorm rooms. You use a payphone and you called it “collect home.” And so I called “collect home,” and I’m like, “Mom, I hung with Eleanor in New York.” She goes, “Oh, that’s nice. How did that go?” And I was like, “Well, she kind of said something that really made me think about a lot of things. She told me that I’m an artist and that I need to go to a major city and go to art school and that I should leave this.” I don’t remember my mom having a problem with that. I should ask her. I’d be interested to explore that again, what that conversation really was, but in my mind, it wasn’t a problem.

And maybe that’s because my brother had resurfaced with more problems of his own. He got discharged from the military. He was living at home with my mom. I think my mom was dealing with Rob, that it was like, “Oh, well, you’re not quitting college. You just want to change college.” It’s like, “Yes.” And so I applied to San Francisco Art Institute, and I got in on my portfolio.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: On your portfolio photos?

MS. OPIE: On my portfolio photos that I made at Virginia Intermont College.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What was that portfolio like?

MS. OPIE: I don’t know. [Laughs.] I think long exposures of figures walking up dark stairs; think Duane Michals.

[End of track.]

I think I was photographing a lot of the horse events, because my best friend, Carol Bradley, was riding horses all the time. So I would go to all the events. I’d make photographs of the events and people’s backs and pensive looks on people’s faces, all black-and-white, fiber-based printing. And it was good enough to get in for starting a freshman year at the Art Institute.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So that would be 1980—

MS. OPIE: [Eighty-]one, I start. And so my mom said, “I can afford the tuition, but I cannot afford your supplies, your room and board, or anything. You have to figure that out.” And I had a good friend from Virginia Intermont College move to San Francisco, Katherine Genteel, who was a dancer, a ballerina. And so she started living at this residence club called the Kenmore Residence Club.

We started looking for an apartment together in San Francisco to live together as roommates, because we were best friends in Virginia together. Just as friends—at this point, I’m still completely unaware of the fact I am a lesbian. And she decides not to stay in San Francisco—that it’s not going to work for her. She left, and left me kind of high and dry without a roommate, and going to San Francisco Art Institute, kind of, “Wait, we were going to do this thing, and oh, you’re gone now.”

So I was living in a residence club paying a rent. I was running out of money really fast, because paying rent week by week is really hard in San Francisco. And so I went and I asked if they had any jobs. And when you worked there, you got your room and board for free. So I got a job clearing tables from the dining hall for the dinner shift every night. And then I got another job at the YMCA, because I’m, again, good with kids. And I’m after-school counselor, for their after-school program.

So I’m going to San Francisco Art Institute full-time. I’m working the dining hall, busing tables for my

room and board, and I'm working at the YMCA. I'm working hard. But I'm hanging out with people in the residence club. There's lots of other students who work there for their room and board. And I'm just—I'm making friends. I'm good. It's all good. And then I get promoted to the front desk clerk job at the hotel. And I work from three to eight in the morning because I have the best wakeup call voice.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: So, it's deep. I'm calm when I call. People like to hear it. So I became from three to eight in the morning the front desk clerk. And I went through—you had a room about the size of my studio. And you had a bathroom down the hall. So it was kind of like a college dorm, but it's a residence club, so there's a lot of really fucked up people who live there because they pay week by week.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh.

MS. OPIE: It's not an upper residence club. There's a lot of junkies. There's a lot of derelicts. It's not a total fleabag place. In the midst, there's businessmen here and there. It's a very weird, eclectic situation.

So I do well at the Art Institute. It's hard. I fell very behind in certain things. Even though I was always an avid reader, I could never write, and I'm still utterly insecure about writing. I'm into writing classes that are hard. I'm taking 20th-century philosophy with Angela Davis being my teacher.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: Our science classes are held at the Exploratorium, and I'm learning science from Oppenheimer's brother, who was one of the founding members of the Exploratorium and who helped his brother build the bomb and realized that he couldn't, so he was teaching us science at the Exploratorium. And I was making it through. It was hard. I felt stupid. I felt a little out of my element.

There were so many cool art kids that just had all the answers, and they were so much cooler than I ever could possibly be. And they also seemed to have the money and the time to hang out together—where I was busting myself. But I got a tight group of friends in the residence club that I hung with. And after a disastrous amount of roommates, I finally asked my best friend Dean Moser to move into my room with me. He was somebody who'd thought that I had a crush on him. And he had to tell me he was gay. And he, at 18, had packed a suitcase from his Iowa farm and got in a bus and ended up in San Francisco.

So one night, we were sitting on a curb and he said, "Cathy, I've got something to tell you." And I'm like, "What, Dean?" And he said, "I'm gay. And I just wanted you to know because I think you have a crush on me." I looked at him and I said, "I think I'm gay, too, Dean." And that was the first time I verbally said it.

And so we were—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did you know?

MS. OPIE: I just knew. At that point, it was San Francisco. I was living in gay mecca. It was pretty clear to me that all the crushes and everything in high school on the girls that I had, and even at Virginia Intermont College, that it was pretty clear that I was into girls. And that was being shown to me for the first time by living in San Francisco that this would be a possibility.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you feel relieved when you said that to Dean?

MS. OPIE: Yes, very relieved—very, very relieved. But I still didn't tell my parents. So I didn't tell anybody. It was just, I kind of told Dean. That was all I told.

Then there was this woman at the residence club, and we went away to Mendocino. I thought for sure we were going to like—we were making out, but she was like—when we got to this beautiful vacation house that I rented up in the coast, she was like, “No, I'm not a lesbian.” And I was like, “Oh, great.” So—[they laugh]—and then, I was like, “Okay, now, I'm trying to be a lesbian.”

And at this point, the residence club is wearing on me. I'm watching my friends get really heavily into crystal meth, good friends that I hung out with. I'm doing a little bit of it myself but realized that that's a big dark place that I don't want to go, because I'm watching my friends get really fucked up from it.

And I'm just really invested in the school. I asked my mom. I said, “Mom, I can't do this anymore. I have my senior year coming up. I need to live on my own. And can we just figure out how to do this? Can we figure out together how I can just not work and get through my senior year of school?” And so she gets another mortgage on the condo or does some things financially. And my grandmother gives me some money. They scrape it together. So I get a little studio apartment in the Tenderloin, kind of the Tendernob, Lower Nob Hill—upper Tenderloin.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: I'm on my own. I have my own house. I'm doing really well in school. I'm still not one of the cool artists. I never will be. But I started dating one of the cool artists. So I fall in love for the first time in my life.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And who's that?

MS. OPIE: This amazing Italian woman by the name of Paola Ferrario, F-E-R-R-A-R-I-O, and Paola, P-A-U-L-A, like Paola—no, P—how do they spell it? P-A-O-L-A, yes, P-A-O-L-A.

[End of track.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is Hunter Drohojowska-Philp interviewing Catherine Opie at the artist's studio in the West Adams District of Los Angeles, California, on August 13, 2012, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two.

Cathy, we covered a lot of ground about your childhood and your high school years and your college years, but now you're in San Francisco. You're going to the Art Institute. And you have fallen in love with your first responsive woman, I guess.

MS. OPIE: Yes, yes. [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Paola Ferrario.

MS. OPIE: Paola Ferrario.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: F-E-double R-A-R-I-O.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay. So tell me how you met Paola and how that first significant relationship came about.

MS. OPIE: We were in class. I do believe we were in Linda Connor's landscape photography class. We just started hanging out, and she was utterly devoted to photography and so was I. And I was the lab tech, as well, at San Francisco Art Institute. So we just started seeing each other. I think that the first night, I helped her with a shoot in the studio. She was doing these multiple exposures with Polaroid, with a four-by-five camera. Then we went out to get something to eat. And then we went home together. And we made out and we had sex, even though I didn't really know how to have sex. Somehow we figured it out, or she figured it out. And then immediately I went to the bathroom and threw up. [They laugh.] Because it was all way too intense for me. I was 22, so—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So it would be 1986?

MS. OPIE: No, before that. It would be '84.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Before, I'm sorry, yes, because you graduated in '85—1984.

MS. OPIE: Yes, '84.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: In '84—'83, '84. And she was cute. She was about five [foot]—two [inches]—short hair. She grew up in Milan. Her mother was a shoe designer.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] Of course.

MS. OPIE: Of course. She was obviously from a wealthy family, going to art school across the way. We became girlfriends and we did everything together. We photographed constantly together, developed film, oh, just—yes, incredible romance. So I had to come out to my parents, because I was in love. So I called my dad—my dad and my mom are divorced—and I said, "Dad, I have something to tell you." He's like, "What?" And I said, "I'm in love with a woman. I'm a lesbian and I'm in love with a woman." And he said, "That's terrific." [Laughs.] And I was like, "Okay, you're a pervert. We know that about you." [Laughs.]

So he was good about it, but I was really scared to tell my mom—really super scared to tell my mom, because at this point my mom and I are close. She's the one getting me through school. I don't have any other surrogate mothers. I'm fully back. My mom is back. We're communicating all the time. And I didn't want my mom to then not want to be my mom or not mother me anymore, because I was actually really enjoying having her be present in my life.

So I told her. I remember we were in the car. We were driving in Poway. I went home to visit. And she gets really quiet. She goes, "I don't know what to say." I said, "Okay. I don't know either. It just—this is it. I'm in love with a woman and I hope that she wants to marry me and I'm utterly in love. And yes, you're going to meet her. She's coming down to visit and I want to introduce you." She's like, "Okay, well, this is a lot." And I'm like, "Yes, I know it's a lot." And she's like, "Okay." And then for years she had troubles. She struggled with it. Now—not so much anymore.

At this point, she's remarried to a man named Sydney Valentine. He's conservative. He's very Republican, conservative. My family was always Republican, but a little bit more conservative than normal. I think she was nervous more about how to tell him, because she was always the kind of woman that wanted to please her husband in a certain way. She was traditional.

And so I didn't—there was this, always, Cathy's "special friends." So Paola came, and my dad and Paola became really good friends, because my dad is incredibly charming. They became fast friends, and she adores my dad and his sense of humor and his wit and his intelligence, and my mom, she kind of doesn't know what to do with [it], but she hangs out. We do things like go to the zoo. And yes, and we just make a lot of photographs together.

And I decide my last year of San Francisco Art Institute that I was going to go to Yale. So I decide that the course—I've been studying at San Francisco Art Institute. I've had these amazing teachers. I'm highly influenced by Hank Wessel and Larry Sultan.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That would be Henry Wessel.

MS. OPIE: Yes, Henry Wessel, Jr.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And Larry Sultan.

MS. OPIE: Larry Sultan. I'm studying with John Collier, Jr., even though he turns off his hearing aid all the time. I'm studying with Linda Connor, who doesn't like women. I decide she really doesn't like women, or she doesn't like lesbians, one or the other. We never were close, but that's okay. I kind of didn't really need her to be close with me.

I became very close with an adjunct professor by the name of Jeanne Finley, who is working at SF Camerawork at the time. I become a volunteer and an intern at SF Camerawork. And I'm happy. I'm really happy. I'm in a good place. My work is going really well. I'm graduating from San Francisco Art Institute. I'm working really hard on this body of work—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what photographs are these?

MS. OPIE: I made black-and-white street photographs. Early on, at the Art Institute, I really was completely—pretty much—taught from the Szarkowski school of photography. So Winogrand, Frank, Arbus, anything around that kind of core of MoMA photography, and especially Hank Wessel being a part of that core of the Szarkowski school. And so that's why I want to go to Yale, because of Papageorge, Tod Papageorge, who was the head of Yale photo forever, and has just stepped down last year.

So I'm making a really interesting body of work on the Financial District of San Francisco.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: With people.

MS. OPIE: With people. I'm photographing men and women on the street in relationship to—it's the early '80s. Women are becoming part of the workforce. They're wearing kind of the faux woman suits, big shoulder pads. And I'm looking at them in relationship to how they're presenting themselves in the street and how they take up space and what it is for women in the business, and looking at the Financial District as a place to really dig into and think about. And at the same time, I'm making a book of photographs of—or the year before, I had made a book of photographs of portraits of the Kenmore Residence Club before I moved out.

So right before I moved out of the Kenmore, I made in John Collier Jr.'s class my first real substantial photo project, which took about eight months of documenting the Kenmore really seriously. Before that, I wasn't working in bodies of work. I was just photographing and hanging work up in crates. I hadn't made really a formative body of work yet. Kenmore was my first one.

On the Financial District, I went as far as going to Wall Street, to photograph on Wall Street, to see how it was different than San Francisco, and just really studying it; what does it mean to photograph place, and how do I put myself as a photographer in relationship to place in the street, and thinking about all that stuff. And then within the body of work, I meet a young businesswoman. And I go and I take her portrait in her cubicle, and on her stationery I have her define success, what her idea of success is, on her notepad. And then I do the same with a young businessman, where he defines his idea of success.

So I have a full body of work, and it's my senior thesis show. I'm graduating. And I'm hopefully going to go to—I applied to Yale, Chicago Art Institute, and CalArts.

I was awarded the Robert Howe Fletcher Cup at San Francisco, which is—over the years of the school, as long as it's been around, they've awarded the big silver cup with your name engraved on it to the most outstanding student at the Art Institute. So the geeky, non-cool girl, which was—everybody was really surprised—got awarded the most outstanding student award. Both my parents were there, even though they were divorced at the graduation, and they were proud. And I was utterly in love—completely in love with Paola. I wore a dress for graduation that she bought me. We were playing with butch-femme relationships at that point. I was a little bit out in the leather community, but Paola and I weren't players in that yet.

I wasn't really photographing the queer underground scene of San Francisco yet, but I was aware of people who were playing, in terms of S&M, and being part of that community and the kind of clubs and the dungeons and stuff like that. But Paola and I were more like a very traditional couple.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And just to pause before we go on, to what extent has the women's movement had any impact on your development as an artist or a photographer at this point?

MS. OPIE: A little bit, because of Angela Davis. And also just being aware of women in San Francisco, but not much. But the older women's movement, quite a bit, because my mother was born in Seneca Falls, New York. So I'm very aware of the power of women and feminism and independent women because of my grandmother. My grandmother actually got divorced when my mom was young and started working for Sears-Roebuck, and was one of these women who kind of did it on her own.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is your mother's mother.

MS. OPIE: My mother's mother.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And your mother was affected by that.

MS. OPIE: Yes. It was hard when her parents divorced, but they fought a lot. She remembers them fighting. And then her dad passed away shortly after they got divorced. So I forget if he got cancer or what happened to him, but I know he got sick and he died. So I never met my grandfather on that side of the family.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But you had some awareness of the role of being an independent woman.

MS. OPIE: Yes, I had an idea of what an independent woman was from my grandmother. And then my mother getting divorced from my dad and going back to becoming—but I didn't really—that's the dog, I think, chewing a bone outside the door. Nobody really talked about feminism at that point. It wasn't until probably—I photographed Mondale and Ferraro, one of their last rallies they had in

San Francisco, on a pouring-rain day where it seemed like they're not going to win; like, This isn't going to go. And it was the first VP potential for a woman to become vice president.

I was very aware also in terms of documenting San Francisco, the Financial District, that I was looking at women in the workplace. But I didn't necessarily think that it was a feminist perspective. But then I took a class, a summer class, from Connie Hatch at San Francisco Art Institute. She taught a summer class. And it was all about women photographers. And then that's where—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Connie Hatch's course on women photographers.

MS. OPIE: Women in Photography.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: And a feminist course, because Connie was a feminist and she was doing really hardcore early-feminist work. And so it's, like, Linda Connor and the women that were teaching. Jeanne Finley definitely was a young woman, was a feminist, but I don't even think she called herself that. But Connie was my first feminist role model, besides Angela Davis.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you were photographing the women on Wall Street, you were aware you were photographing women in the workplace. You were aware of what you were doing.

MS. OPIE: I was aware of what I was doing, but I wasn't really aware of calling it that I was making feminist work.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

MS. OPIE: I knew that I was looking and kind of being aware of men and women and the binary of that in the workforce, but I didn't really know Connie's project at that point. I wasn't calling it feminist work whatsoever, no.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you won this big award, the Robert Howe Fletcher Cup. Everyone's very proud of you and—so what happened with graduate school?

MS. OPIE: Well, I went and I visited Yale. And I fell in love with Yale. I was sure that I was going to get into Yale. It just seemed like, Of course you're going to get into Yale.

I apply to Yale. I apply to Chicago Art Institute. And I apply to CalArts. CalArts is actually my last choice. I go and I visit Yale. I bring the Yale sweater home. I do everything that's—I went and I visited. I talked to people. I did everything. I don't get an interview. I get a rejection letter. I don't get into Yale. Paola applied to Yale and she got in.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh.

MS. OPIE: She's at home in Italy for the summer, and she breaks up with me over the phone. And what really sucks—because this is back in the days when we still wrote letters, love letters, to each other. And it takes a long time to get a letter. So she breaks up with me over the phone, but I continue for weeks on end to get her love letters. "I'm moving to Connecticut, going to Yale. We're going to still be together. I love you. I want to marry you." But meanwhile, she had broken up with me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my God.

MS. OPIE: So my heart is broken. I'm crushed. I didn't get into Yale. I didn't get into Chicago Art Institute. At this point, I've been out of school for one year, because I needed to take a year off to get a portfolio together. I was just working a bunch of odd jobs, but I ended up working at Rainbow Grocery, which is the great co-op grocery of San Francisco. I'm a produce stocker. So I'm paying for my little studio apartment on my own. And I'm working at Rainbow 40 hours a week, making beautiful produce displays—the best 100-pound carrot wheels you've ever seen. And I become friends with all these really cool dykes, because all these hardcore dykes are also stuck in produce.

So I'm out of school. Paola broke my heart. I'm really in this place, and I start working out with a good friend of mine, Jamie Smith, who I went to school with—belongs to this all-women's karate school. So I start karate. And I go to the dojo two hours a day every day, as well as stock produce. And it's an all-women's dojo. It's all dykes, with a really powerful dyke teacher.

So I'm all of a sudden in dyke land. So where I was just—it was just me and Paola, the only lesbian couple at San Francisco Art Institute for as far as I knew, then I surrounded myself with women. And I started playing, started going to dungeons. I joined the Outcast. I'm photographing—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What is the—

MS. OPIE: —Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What's the Outcast?

MS. OPIE: The Outcast is this really cool women's leather group. In the early '80s I had photographed them, but then I became a member of them.

I was finding a different kind of sexuality in myself. I was really curious about S&M and had kind of been on the periphery of it and thinking about it for a while, but decided to fully explore it and go into it. And even though my heart was broken, I was like, Okay, I'm going to go to grad school, and I'll go get into somewhere and I'm going to just do this.

So after I got my rejection letters from Yale and Chicago Art Institute, I get put on the waiting list at CalArts. But I'm on the wait-list. So Allan Sekula calls me and he interviews me over the phone. He's a really, really brilliant man. And I think he's thinking like, Wow, she's not very bright. [Laughs.] Because he's asking me really hard theoretical questions that I have no ability to really answer. And I'm like, Oh, that's it. I'm not going to grad school. This is it.

And I send him another portfolio. At this point, I'm photographing color—2 ¼— and I'm photographing high school football games and cheerleaders and stuff from the street. I'm not doing black-and-white street photography anymore. I've moved into color.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're using a 2 ¼ Hasselblad?

MS. OPIE: I'm using a Rolleiflex and a Hasselblad.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did you own these?

MS. OPIE: I own the Rolleiflex. I didn't own the Hasselblad.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And technically, how were you moving forward in your photography at

this point? How did you go from like a 35-millimeter –

MS. OPIE: I knew how to do large format at this point, too. I had Pirkle Jones, an amazing teacher.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And I did want you to talk about that, too.

MS. OPIE: Yes, Pirkle Jones was incredible.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Before we talk about your next year, before graduate school—

MS. OPIE: Let's go back to San Francisco Art Institute?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, I hate to do that, but just—

MS. OPIE: It's okay.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —briefly. You've moved; you're about to make a great technical leap in working with a 2 ¼- and large-format work.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So how did that happen for you? And when did it happen for you, before you left San Francisco?

MS. OPIE: Yes, in school, I took a large-format class from Pirkle Jones. Pirkle was actually Ansel Adams's printer for years. I actually ended up having dinner one night at his house in Hill Valley with his wonderful wife, and also Ansel was still alive at that point. And so I met him. That was early on. And I totally, utterly fell in love with large format.

But it was really hard. You can't do large format and be a street photographer. You just didn't do that. So I was really battling between my 35 and large format, but I was making landscapes, and I was doing all the assignments that you did in large format, but I hadn't switched to large format yet because it wasn't going to work for what I was doing in terms of street photography. But I had all the skill. I knew how to make my own chemistry, from dry chemistry. I knew how to tray-develop negatives. I knew how to work with an eight-by-10-camera if I needed to. And then I got an old Rolleiflex, and I just started doing a little bit of street photography with a square format. And that was kind of interesting. Then I was back and forth between the 35, my Nikon, and my Rollei.

But yes, Pirkle was incredible. It was also a real pain in the ass to haul a four-by-five camera around, because they weren't liked then, and I wasn't using a field camera; I was using a studio camera, one of the old Calumet ones that had the old metal monorail. It was just a lug of a thing.

So even though I knew how to do it, I didn't marry myself to large format, using it on a regular basis, until I got to CalArts.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But then when you—we talk about the transition. You've had your portfolio of street photography that you've submitted. And now, after graduating from San Francisco, you're putting together the portfolio that you hope will get you into graduate school.

MS. OPIE: Meanwhile was the women on Wall Street, Financial District, body of work, but then I did a whole other portfolio of color kind of moments of Americana, almost like Eggleston, to a certain extent. I would say if it was close to anybody, it would be very close to Eggleston.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: William Eggleston.

MS. OPIE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that's when you're photographing the high school—

MS. OPIE: High school football, Fourth of July parties on the beach, signage, really solid 2 ¼ portraits of people that I met, as well as just street photography that way, but more static, not in that 35-millimeter, Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand way. Much more static.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Which is, I think, much more what you ultimately come to be known for.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so when Allan Sekula calls, has he seen that work?

MS. OPIE: He saw the second portfolio, because he asked for me to send it. So he did, even after probably this horrible phone interview; I can't even imagine what he was thinking. He did ask for a second portfolio. And then I'm un-waitlisted and I'm actually getting accepted. So I quit my job at Rainbow Grocery. I say goodbye to all my women friends in the dojo. I'm single. I don't have a girlfriend. I'm still pining after Paola. And at this point, my head is shaved or really short haircut—no, no, no, I have a mullet. I have a mullet. I have a full-on lesbian mullet. So I have a San Francisco '80s hairdo.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Have you had a tattoo yet?

MS. OPIE: I haven't had a tattoo yet, because people weren't tattooing back then. I wasn't—but I had the leather jacket. You had to have the leather jacket.

So I moved into piercing and tattooing much later in my life, but all my ears were pierced, I had the full-on—but there weren't any facial piercings at that point in the community. So this is '85, '86.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you're experimenting with all this kind of leather stuff and the dungeon stuff and the S&M stuff, but you haven't—it's appealing to you, or it's just sort of you're being a tourist at this point?

MS. OPIE: No, it's appealing to me. I'm playing. I become a pretty good player. I'm known as a pretty darn good masochist.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: I had practice of being a masochist, so—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how did that, psychologically and emotionally—did you question it, or did you just decide to go along with it?

MS. OPIE: Went along with it, but it felt, again, almost an alter personality, like I was able to—I've done very [well] at compartmentalizing myself in my life. So when I worked at the YMCA, that was Cathy with the kids. When I worked at the Kenmore Residence Club, that was the Kenmore Residence Club. And then when I was at school, that was me being the art student.

I've always been able to navigate multiple situations at the same time. And there's a little bit of like,

Oh, this just me sporting all of this. It was odd—I don't know really how to describe it. I was utterly into it, but at the same time, what was always more important to me was my identity as an artist.

So I'm playing and I'm doing it and I'm photographing it privately. I'm photographing for *On Our Backs*, the lesbian porn magazine, privately, under "Cathy Opie," but not under this Catherine Opie. So it's all Cathy Opie.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, like that's such a pseudonym.

MS. OPIE: I know. [They laugh.] I know, right?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So funny.

MS. OPIE: Such a pseudonym. I know. So brilliant of me, isn't it?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you're publishing these photographs that you're taking—

MS. OPIE: Lesbian erotica photography. And at this point, I've tried to get a job at Fraenkel Gallery, but I didn't get a job at Fraenkel Gallery. But I would go in there all the time, early on when I was an art student, and ask to look at the Mapplethorpes. So Mapplethorpe is like the X portfolios in my head; the permission to make erotic photographs is there. I just don't want to do that because I don't want to fuck up my chance of being a teacher.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: Because I want to go on to be a professor. That's my goal. I didn't even think like, Oh, I'll end up showing in museums. I wasn't thinking that. I was thinking like, Well, you do all of this, and hopefully maybe I'll show at a few photo galleries. Maybe if I'm really lucky one day, I can show at Jeffrey Fraenkel. But otherwise, I got to keep this a little bit in the down-low and in the community, because if other people find out, maybe they'll think I'm really fucked up and I'm weird, and then I can't move forward with my life. That's what I'm thinking.

So I don't show that to get into grad school, which probably would have actually gotten me into grad school right away—[laughs]—now that I think of it. And yes, and I go to CalArts. And I leave San Francisco behind.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You go to the CalArts in '87?

MS. OPIE: In '86, '87. I graduated in '88, so I start in the fall of '86.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: In '86. So it's 1986 and you get accepted at CalArts, and how do you make that transition from hipster San Francisco to Valencia?

MS. OPIE: It was like returning home to Poway, California. I was like, Shit. And I didn't have a car. Because in San Francisco I didn't need a car. My mom finally gets me a car the second semester that I'm there, but for my first semester I have to figure out how to be a street photographer in Valencia, California.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Without a car.

MS. OPIE: Without a car.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you arrive at CalArts, and who are your teachers at CalArts?

MS. OPIE: Allan Sekula, Catherine Lord, Connie Hatch again, Millie Wilson; I'm studying with John Divola, Judy Fiskin, Jo Ann Callis. I'm studying with Gay Block, who later I ended up printing for.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Gay—

MS. OPIE: Gay Block.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: G-A-Y Block.

MS. OPIE: G-A-Y B-L-O-C-K, very unfortunate name for a lesbian woman.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: But, yes. Krzysztof Wodiczko was huge for me. We spent a lot of time together, Krzysztof and I—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How do you spell Krzysztof's last name?

MS. OPIE: Wodiczko—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, Wodiczko—

MS. OPIE: W-O-D-I-Z-C-K-O, all right.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, yes, yes. But you can actually pronounce it. Okay.

MS. OPIE: And—it's hard for me. I feel stupid there. I feel really stupid there. I feel out of my element out there.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: Everybody knows that I was the wait-list, right, because it's like, I get there—and my best friend Dean Moser drives me down. He's still my best friend. And it's blistering hot. It's beginning of September in Valencia, California, and I've been living in the Bay Area for the last five years. And it's utterly blistering hot. We look around and there's nothing around us except for, again, all these housing communities that I witnessed when I was in Rancho Bernardo, Poway. I watched master planned communities just get built around me and take away my precious chaparral around me.

I land in this weird school, in this middle of nowhere. And the first thing Dean and I do is—he loves amusement parks; I love amusement parks. He said, "Well, let's—God, it's so hot. We're screwed." My dorm room isn't ready. I can't move in. They can't find my paperwork. I'm kind of a wait-list I don't-know-who, what are you doing there. And so he goes, "Let's go to Magic Mountain and have fun."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Are you wearing the leather jacket and the mullet at this point?

MS. OPIE: I have the mullet, but the leather jacket I had to take off because of the heat. But yes, no, I'm full-on, like, clinking with cock rings on the side of my jacket. And I probably had tight pants with Doc Martens, and I have the whole leather dyke mid-'80s look of San Francisco.

So we go to Magic Mountain.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: At Magic Mountain. [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: And we are riding the roller coasters, having a grand old time. Then after we get off the bumper cars, I fall going down the steps, and I land face-first on the cement.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, God.

MS. OPIE: And I chipped in half my front tooth. And I've never worn braces. I've always had ridiculously straight teeth, where everybody assumes I wear braces, but I've always been proud of my smile. My smile is a winning feature. I never really liked anything else, but I liked my smile.

So I start school where everybody's smarter than me, with half the tooth missing in front. [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And scabs on your face as well?

MS. OPIE: I had bruises everywhere. Bruises everywhere. But they're all cool—it's okay. And I become really good friends with people there. I live in the dorms, so I'm living in Ahmanson, F2. I do believe my dorm room was F2. And I'm living with a composer from Iceland—I don't remember his name—two women from the dance department—Jory Felice, who is a young painter, and I don't know—I think there's five of us to the dorm [room]. And I'm okay; communal living again. Here we go. And they're nice. They have cars, so they drive me places.

So what's out my back door but yet another master planned community of what I'd watched in Poway, California—something utterly familiar to me, in relationship to being back in Southern California. So I start from the get-go my fall year photographing it. That's what I do. And that was what I did for two years.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And are you using 35 millimeter?

MS. OPIE: Hasselblad and four by five. So I switched to medium format and large format and later a little bit of 645, because I got a handheld 645 camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I don't know what a 645 camera is.

MS. OPIE: It's a six—it's smaller than a 2 ¼ negative. So it's not 2 ¼ by 2 ¼. It's a little bit half that, but it's rectangular. So it's smaller than a six by seven, but it's a handheld, kind of medium-format camera that's a little bit faster. You can work a little bit faster with it than the Hasselblad.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And does this equipment belong to [the] school?

MS. OPIE: The Hasselblad and the four by five do, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So one of the advantages of being at the school is that you certainly have access to all sorts of high-end equipment?

MS. OPIE: I have high-end equipment and I have beautiful darkrooms, and I have my own darkroom —

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: —that I share with another person. So grad students are given their own darkrooms. They're not given studios, because at this point photographers don't need studios, right? It's still that kind of like, oh, it just goes from the enlarger to whatever. Later on, photographers are given studios, but at that point no studios for photographers. So just a darkroom that you share with

another grad student.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now you're already extremely technically skilled.

MS. OPIE: I have a lot of technical skill and I'm a really hard worker. And that's what I had going for me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: I wasn't the one who could talk about everything in this really theoretical way. I didn't know about psychoanalysis. I wasn't able to talk about Freud and Lacan. I wasn't able to talk about Mary Kelly's work. I wasn't able to do any of that. I was never a Michael Asher student. I did not have that. But what I had for me was that I was very skilled image-maker, and I made a lot of images.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did your technical know-how improve while you were at CalArts, or did you bring all of your technical information with you?

MS. OPIE: A little bit. I became a better color printer there, because I had only been doing color for a year or two years at the Art Institute. So I was fully doing color and not doing black and white anymore. So my color printing skills became very good. And I became in charge of the color processor, making sure it ran right and was balanced correctly. That was part of later on getting sick from color chemistry. It was just all of the years of dipping my hands in those machines and pulling out racks and mixing chemistry.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And although you didn't have all this theoretical knowledge when you arrived at CalArts, did you learn it while you were there?

MS. OPIE: I did. San Francisco Art Institute taught me how to make pictures and how to be a very intensely producing artist. CalArts taught me how to talk about the work. So I become a little bit more articulate. I become a little less shy. It's hard. My best friend at CalArts was Richard Hawkins. So him and I become best friends. I hang out with kind of an interesting group of people. There's all these different girls that I kind of hang out with, but I have no lovers.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Let's pause there for a second; talk about your—do you remember what you were asked to read or talk about?

MS. OPIE: Sure. They were really hard readings. You're talking Catherine Lord. You're talking like stuff that—semiotics. And then I had Judith Butler as a teacher who—no, not Judith Butler, I'm sorry—Judith Williamson, who wrote a kind of important book called *Consuming Passion*. So it was really semiotics.

And I actually did have a girlfriend, but she was in Canada. I just remembered. Anna Marie Smith, who was getting her Ph.D., and she was an expert on [Antonio] Gramsci.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: On what?

MS. OPIE: On Gramsci. Gramsci, Gramsci—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, yes.

MS. OPIE: She taught me semiotics, because I couldn't understand what they were talking about.

So she kind of diagrammed it up for me, and she was completely into all of that theory. And she's getting a Ph.D. Now she's a really well-known professor at Cornell. She was amazing.

We had met at a bar. We had met at a bar in Toronto and had a long-distance relationship, my last year in San Francisco, actually. I can't believe I was dating her. We were together—she remembers very clearly me looking out at the ocean and saying, "Okay, here I go, I'm leaving the Bay Area. You're moving to England. I'm moving to Southern California; this is it." But we had had this very hot, long-distance romance for about a year and a half.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: In the year between San Francisco Art Institute and CalArts.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay. So you did have a girlfriend, long-distance girlfriend—

MS. OPIE: I did have a long-distance girlfriend. I can't believe I almost wrote her out.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, it happens. Anna Marie, and how you spell the last name?

MS. OPIE: Anna Marie Smith. So, just Smith.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Smith, okay. How did you have a long-distance relationship with her?

MS. OPIE: Well, we wrote each other lots of letters. And we would visit each other. And we would road-trip together. And yes, we just would have a long-distance love affair.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then once you're at CalArts, she was able to help explain semiotics to you.

MS. OPIE: Yes, she explained semiotics to me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's useful.

MS. OPIE: Yes, it was very useful because I was like, "What are they talking about?" And so she broke it down, and in a very symbolic way.

And I'm reading—what am I reading? What am I reading? I'm trying to get through the readings. I'm reading a lot of Douglas Crimp. I'm reading a lot of *October*. I'm reading Rosalind Krauss. I'm just reading early art theory. And it is just going completely over my head. But I muddle through.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you—well, they didn't have grades at CalArts, did they?

MS. OPIE: No, we had pass, fail, and high pass, yes, same at the Art Institute.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you didn't have grades in the Art Institute. You didn't have grades there.

MS. OPIE: All high passes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: All high passes at CalArts as well? To what extent do you think that the grades were based on your knowledge of the material versus what you're producing as an artist?

MS. OPIE: It was only what I produced as an artist. Yes. They knew that I couldn't write, and they were pretty cool about—like Richard Hawkins would help me a lot, because he's actually a really brilliant writer. I added text to a show that he really helped me write, figured out with me.

I took a writing class with Catherine, and she thought I was a really good writer, but I had no form. I have great content, but I have no ability to grammatically correct myself or anything of that, because I didn't get that. I didn't make it through that way. I have my Strunk and White *Elements of Style* on my bookshelf, and I'm looking at it, and I'm trying to figure everything out, but it's just not there. To this day, I need a very good editor if I ever write. I have good content. I have good ideas. But yes, I get very scared about writing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But they were basically looking at your imagery. And at this point, you talk about how you go back to the master planned, the—

MS. OPIE: Yes, and I document it. So they're talking to me about New Topographics. All of a sudden, I'm introduced for the first time to Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams and the antithesis of Ansel Adams and everything. And I don't know that that's what I'm doing. But they tell me, "Look, you need to look at this work." So I'm looking at it and I'm studying it. And I'm shooting. And I just don't stop shooting.

So at the end of my first year—it's a two-year program—I fill an entire gallery with work on the master plan. I make a floor out of photographs I did of all the debris that's left on the site before the lawn goes down and as the construction workers are there, this full Plexiglas floor that you walk over. I pre-frame a house. Rita McBride becomes a really good friend of mine. She has a show at the same time. And she builds a studded house for her sculptural piece in middle of the gallery. So we have this conversation going with work.

The images, at this point, in the first show, were of the construction of the community, as well as the model homes and the rules and regulations of the community. So that's the first-year show.

The second-year show is still the construction of the community, photographs of the interiors of people's houses that chose to live there, and just like the women's definition of success, I had them define through an interview why they chose to live in a master planned community. And then I have more model home photographs.

I've covered the entire gallery with green Astroturf. And then in it is the middle of a tree, because there's this joke of the trees in the community. When I interviewed the family, they said, "Yes, I'm actually allergic to this tree, but we're not allowed to remove it because of the rules and regulations of the community."

So I go one day with a clipboard, knock on the door of a house that was just getting done, and I said, "Hi, I'm with Newhall Land and Farming, and we're really sorry, but the tree that we put in your front yard actually has a weird exotic disease and we need to remove it and treat it for a couple of weeks. And then I'll be bringing it back and replanting it." And so I'd dig up the tree, I take it, and I put in the middle of my installation.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: So—and then I put it back. I replant it and give it back to them after my installation.

But so for two years, that's what I did. I looked at the master plan and thought about it. And it was really interesting because I had like Catherine Lord, and really out professors. And they kept saying

to me, “Okay, look, you’re this leather dyke, and we know that from San Francisco. We know this, but why are you not making queer work?” And this is at the time when Douglas started teaching.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Douglas Crimp.

MS. OPIE: Yes. AIDS is really in the press. A lot of the things that we’re studying is in relationship to activism. I’m a member of ACT UP and Queer Nation at this point. And I kept telling them that the master plan is queer work. And they’re like, “Well, no, it’s not.” And I said, “Listen, it actually is. It is queer work because what I’m doing, I’m trying to really look at how communities are formed and what the basis of that is in relationship to an identity politic.” I said, “We have utterly white flight from urban centers.” At this point, my own reading goes completely away from art theory, and it’s only studying the history of the suburbs.

So at this point, I started reading Dolores Hayden and fall completely in love with her. I’m reading *Crabgrass Frontier*. I’m reading all of this stuff about the history of urban communities, Gwendolyn Wright, and then I’m thinking about that in relationship to how I’m creating images and making this installation.

So my own personal research is actually gone to urban theory. And then the other part of it, just on a personal level, was queer theory, of what was happening in terms of the AIDS epidemic at that point.

And so that’s—yes—and so they kept saying like, “Why aren’t you doing queer work.” And I kept saying, “I am.”

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And now you have these out lesbian teachers, authority figures—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How does that affect—or does that affect—your own identity or your own comfort zone? You’re obviously very comfortable, but does it have an effect on you at all?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I think so. I think that it was really positive for me to finally have some lesbian role models who were older and that I had an enormous amount of respect for, but also fear for.

Catherine Lord was scary to me. We’re friends to this day, but she scared me. She was really smart in this way that I felt very incompetent around and very insecure.

But I was really close with Millie Wilson, her partner at the time. Millie would go trudging with me out in the mud and just sit in a home with me that was being constructed. And we would talk about what that meant for me to look at this and what home is on a deeper level for me; that these moments of—also this transition of master planned community is not only wrapped up in actually trying to describe something that’s an American phenomena in relationship to suburbs, but it’s also really personal to me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: So I tell her really personal things.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: I tell her about my childhood. I make my first piece about my brother and the violence that I had when I was a child, for a magazine; I write a poem. I forget what magazine it was. I think it was

the magazine that Jody Zellen was editing called *Frame* something or another. And I titled the piece "Violence Is a Personal Thing." And I show her this film on my brother that we did, eight millimeter, when I was a kid. I always had a movie camera, and I always making little eight-millimeter film. And it's a really intense film of him beating me up.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did you do that?

MS. OPIE: Well, it was the neighbor kid photographing, our good friend Regan Cole. It was supposed to be just the fake murder, mock thing, like we were playing, but Rob got really into it, and it became another little eight-millimeter film of intense violence.

So I showed it to Millie, and I'm talking to her about the master plan. I'm talking to her about what this work needs in a certain other way that, yes—and she kept saying, "Well, you need to make this personal, too. You need to have your own history with it." And I said, "No, I'm not comfortable with that." I said, "I'd rather present it in relationship to the ideas around this and the ideas of actually what conformity really does and that it leaves so many of us out in a certain way." I think that that's [a] much more interesting thing, if I can look at it universally, versus completely personally.

So I argue that and I argue that it's queer work. And I argue all of these things. But it was really great to have these people to kind of set those platforms with and have as role models, because I think that the next jump that I make is huge.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So that was your graduate show.

MS. OPIE: It's my graduate show.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what is the response to that—

MS. OPIE: Really great. I've gone from being on the wait-list to being—by my second year, Richard Hawkins and I were the only two students in the art department that were offered full scholarships. So I have a full ride at this point at CalArts, which is good, because my mom was like—it's hard on her. It's getting financially really hard on her to keep me in art school. And for a job, I'm loading trucks in the swing shift at UPS.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: So I'm loading semi trucks every night. I'm bruised and battered from it. And I'm the only woman doing it. My whole body is just covered with bruises because the guys put me through hell. Because at that point, it's what, 1987, and this short-haired dyke comes and loads trucks in the valley at UPS. You can only imagine what these guys thought. And how they just made sure that they were going to torture me every night with giving me four semis to load and sort packages and then back of the truck, sort packages, back to the truck, and just kept it going.

And I'm dyslexic, so I can't memorize the numbers of where the packages need to go. So I have all the numbers taped on, like a football quarterback reading a play—I have the numbers taped to my arm, so that I can remember what zip codes go into what trucks.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Wow.

MS. OPIE: And—yes, it was hard. It was really hard.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So when you graduated from CalArts, you graduate—

MS. OPIE: I graduate.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Your M.F.A., and here it is, 1988. And then what happens?

MS. OPIE: Well, before I graduated, I said, I need a job, because you got to have a job. So I go, right before graduation, to Pan Pacific Camera, which is located on La Brea, where Jet Rag is now. And I introduce myself. And they're looking for a person to work in rentals. So I become a rental manager. I'm organizing all the shoots of Herb Ritts [and Annie Leibovitz—CO], and all the fashion photographers, at that point, putting all the gear together. I'm learning a lot. It's a whole other education. I'm learning a lot about stuff. And the owner like really liked me, and I didn't—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It was like big commercial shoots for advertising or fashion—

MS. OPIE: Yes. Fashion and editorial—it was kind of like Pan Pacific [was] what Samy's is now. It was the big camera store of LA. People from all over the world would come in, and I would set up their gear for them, in terms of their first assistant picking it up. And so I got to talk to everybody, and I got to know that a little bit. I move in downtown to the Long Beach Ave. lofts, which were just built.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The Long Beach what?

MS. OPIE: Long Beach Avenue lofts.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And where are they?

MS. OPIE: They're downtown, off of Long Beach Ave. And I get an 1,800-square-foot loft, because I'm an artist and that's what artists do. And Richard Hawkins is my roommate.

Richard never gets a job. So I'm making \$7.50 an hour at Pan Pacific Camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, dear.

MS. OPIE: And Richard never gets a job. He never gets a job and he never gets a job. And I can't afford it anymore. I've put all the money I had saved into the loft. I'd actually stolen all the cabinetry from one of the master planned community houses.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: I drove up in my big station wagon and I took all—because you got a \$250 rebate on your loft if you put your own kitchen in. So I just took a kitchen out of a house that was getting built.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] That's very funny.

MS. OPIE: Because I know the community so well, and I know the security guards, and I know everything about it. So I do that, and I put that in my loft downtown. And get this kind of kitchen together. And then I make friends with this woman from France in the rental department, named Tato. I don't know what her last name is, but she was Tato. And she lives in this amazing house in MacArthur Park that was built in 1898, and it was all French musicians living in it. And she had a room for \$300 a month.

So I say bye-bye to Richard, because our rent was \$800 a month and I was covering it all by myself for the most part. Richard would have a bit of money here and there, but it was just too hard. So we

part. We love each other. We part. There's no bad feelings, but I just—because I have a lease, somebody else ended up taking over the loft. So Richard moves in with somebody. I move in with somebody. And I'm living by MacArthur Park.

A lot of things are happening in MacArthur Park at that point. They're putting the Red Line in. It's the beginning of the subway line of LA. And it's all El Salvadorian refugees. MacArthur Park is just a huge war between the Rampart District and a lot of drugs, a lot of just absolute dysfunction, while at the same time, they're trying to gentrify the area because of the subway going in. So it became utterly fascinating to me, and I began to document it, which was my first body of work that I made outside of grad school, which was called *A Long Way from Paris*. And it showed at Beyond Baroque.

So I ended up having a solo show at Beyond Baroque of it. And I was—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I remember seeing that show.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you were friends with—

MS. OPIE: —Bob and Sheree and all that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That, but also you were good friends with Roger Workman's boyfriend who had passed away, Mark?

MS. OPIE: Oh, yes, Mark Niblock-Smith.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mark Niblock-Smith—

MS. OPIE: Who died of AIDS, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I remember. I remember we all went down, because he was your friend —

MS. OPIE: Yes, we were at CalArts together.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: We went to that show because he said, My friend, Cathy, was having a show. So I'd seen that show. Amazingly. I'd forgot until this moment.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So that was your first—

MS. OPIE: That was my first show outside of CalArts, and I was still making work about community. And then friends like Mark Niblock-Smith and a lot of friends in San Francisco and a lot of people in my life were dying. I was part of Queer Nation and ACT UP. And I could no longer just make work about community in relationship to ideas of its structure. I had to start making work about my friends. And so I started the *Portraits*.

First, I did *Being and Having*, which is my friends with fake moustaches on.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that has a very interesting relationship—the title has a very interesting implication.

MS. OPIE: To Lacan.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: We're talking about Jacques Lacan.

MS. OPIE: Yes. And I didn't title it. Anna Marie Smith, the woman who taught me semiotics, was looking at the work, because every once in a while we would get together and we were still friends and we'd have a little fling because I was still single. And so she said, "You know what"—and I'm like, "I don't know what to call this." She goes, "I have a perfect title for you." And she goes "*Being and Having*." And then she had me read Lacan, and we talked about it. But that's how the title came about. It was Anna Marie titling it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Having a phallus—the man has a phallus and a woman is being a phallus.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Correct.

MS. OPIE: Yes. So *Being and Having*. And it was perfect because it would fit in on all these different levels, too. Because we could be butch; we could own that identity; we could fake people out with our moustaches, which was what we were doing in LA at that time. I was part of this whole group of people with Club Fuck.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Club Fuck?

MS. OPIE: Club Fuck, which was started by James and Miguel. Miguel ended up passing away from AIDS.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who are James and Miguel?

MS. OPIE: They start Club Fuck with Ron Athey and Crystal Cross and this whole kind of leather group of LA.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And do you have any idea what James and Miguel's last names were?

MS. OPIE: No, I do not.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

MS. OPIE: So I'm going up to San Francisco to play with my friends in terms of the leather community, but I haven't really established any leather community for myself here. And at this point, I fall in love again with Pam Gregg.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: G-R-E—

MS. OPIE: —G-G. I actually am going out with Sheree Rose at the time that I meet Pam.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And Sheree Rose was—

MS. OPIE: —Bob Flanagan's lover for a long time. So Sheree and I are playing in the LA leather community together, but not heavily, because Bob is really her toy. And when you date Sheree Rose, you're basically dating Bob Flanagan, too. So it was not like—I never slept with Bob, but he was always there. And it was always, like, there. Sheree was a little bit older than me, and I was a

little bit worried about how to introduce her to my mom. [They laugh.] I was like, How am I going to bring—how am I going to explain this to my mom? Because I'm still a good Midwestern girl, you know?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And this should be—at this point you're about—in 1990.

MS. OPIE: Nineteen ninety.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Your *Beyond Baroque* show is—

MS. OPIE: Yes, 1990 probably.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Nineteen ninety, okay.

MS. OPIE: Yes. So I meet Pam. And Pam's a young intern. I meet her in a leather club. At this point, I'm playing with all these really cool people. I'm playing with Mike and Sky, who I later photograph. A lot of the early portraits are coming out of that group of friends at that time. And Pam's a player. But she's interning at MOCA, and she wants to be an artist. She's, I think, a couple of years younger than me, and she's adorable and sexy. And we fall in love. And I move out of the house on Burlington Ave. in MacArthur Park area into an apartment on Sanborn Ave., in Silver Lake, with her.

It's the first person that I've ever lived with. It's my first domestic relationship. And again, unbelievable happiness, just crazy happiness. I'm working on my work; *Beyond Baroque* showed me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Just one question. Do you have the address of Burlington Avenue, where your house was?

MS. OPIE: Eight something. I'd have to look it up. But 800 block. It was beautiful blue Victorian. It's still there. Post office was across the street. The post office isn't there anymore.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you said you're on Sanborn and—do you remember that address?

MS. OPIE: No, but it's down, because I had a long history with Sanborn. Tony lived behind us.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay, so you and Pam are living in the apartment on Sanborn. You're very happy about your show at *Beyond Baroque*. It's 1990. You're playing in the leather bars—

MS. OPIE: —in the leather bars, hanging out with a really cool group of people. Judie Bamber and Tim Ebner are our best friends. We do everything with Judie and Tim. Judie and I discover, as we're in the tunnel—I take them down to the Red Line and we walk the Metro rail—

[End of track.]

MS. OPIE: —we discover that we're born in the same day, in the same year, and that she was born in Michigan and I was born in Ohio. So we become the twins. We become like utterly best friends. And I'm living this very interesting life. So in our living room, on Sanborn, I start the *Being and Having* body of work. I have the yellow background. I have all my friends buy the moustaches on Hollywood Boulevard. All of them decorate them in different ways. And I start that body of work.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: And then Richard Hawkins and I—Richard turns me onto Hans Holbein, because he sees

the *Being and Having* body [of] work, and he said, “Do you know Holbein?” And I’m like, “A little bit.” He goes, “Let’s really talk about this.”

So then we started a collaboration [on] the *Portraits* series. But after the first two portraits, *Crystal Cross* and *Christian*, he realizes it’s my body of work and he ducks out of it. He goes, “This is yours.” And I said, “Yes, kind of is.” And we showed the first two pictures together as co-authors, but then after that, it was all titled under me.

But Richard was really important at that period of time. He was also still my best friend. And at that point we were having to say goodbye to Tony. He was really sick.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Tony.

MS. OPIE: Tony Greene.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Tony Greene

MS. OPIE: Yes, the Norton Halls, the estate of Tony’s. He lives behind us from Sanborn. And then Ron Athey is just on the other side of me. So at this point, Silver Lake is still really queer. Tim Ebner works at the fish place—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Milly’s .

MS. OPIE: No, not Milly’s, Neptune.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh.

MS. OPIE: Seafood Neptune—Seafood Bay.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Seafood Bay, along with Chris Wilson.

MS. OPIE: Along with Chris Wilson.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And Benjamin Weissman.

MS. OPIE: And Ben, exactly.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How could I forget?

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I lived down there.

MS. OPIE: That was the best clam chowder that place had—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The whole thing was—

MS. OPIE: And there was still leather bars everywhere. Even though AIDS was hitting—you would see it in the streets, but it wasn’t as devastating as when you went up to the Castro in San Francisco, where everybody just looked—the community was gutted at that point. San Francisco was a really hard place to go to.

So I make *Being and Having*. Pam has an affair and she breaks up with me. Heartbreak again. I give

her the apartment on Sanborn. Crystal Cross and all these lesbians live in Koreatown on Catalina Street, and so I moved to 188 South Catalina. It's an all-dyke building except for two apartments. So Jenny Shimizu is up above me, Crystal Cross, Ellie and Pam, just other women everywhere. And all of them work on their motorcycles all day long. They were already in *Being and Having*. We were all really close friends. And they nursed me through my horrible heartbreak about Pam.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So would this be 1991?

MS. OPIE: Ninety-one.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: We're talking, it's 1991; you're single again, living in the all-dyke building—

MS. OPIE: I'm single.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —on Catalina. Playing in the leather bars.

MS. OPIE: Playing in the leather bars.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you just finished *Being and Having*.

MS. OPIE: Yes, and I'm working part time at UC Irvine, as well as the camera store. So Catherine Lord—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Teaching?

MS. OPIE: No. No, not till later. I'm adjunct teaching here and there, but no. Catherine Lord leaves CalArts, and she becomes the dean, the head of art at UC Irvine. And she hires me to turn the printmaking studios into photo. There was no photo. So I design all the darkrooms, buy all the equipment, and put the whole photography department together, and continue to manage it for a couple of years, once school started, until I just couldn't bear it anymore. And I started adjunct teaching a little bit more. Then my career was going really well. But we'll back up to '91.

So '91, I'm working at Pan Pacific and UC Irvine, living at Catalina. And I go up for the summer to San Francisco with all my colored seamless and my four-by-five camera. A friend loans me a studio. I had started making the portraits in my living room on Sanborn. Then on Catalina Street I continued to make portraits in my living room. And then I start going to San Francisco, and I rent a studio, and I make more portraits. And '92, my friend Steakhouse tattooed "dyke" on the back of her neck, and so I make *Dyke*. And I'm fully—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What's her name?

MS. OPIE: Steakhouse—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Steakhouse is her nom de dyke?

MS. OPIE: I don't even know her name. She's legally Steakhouse.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: She tattoos "dyke" on the back of her neck. Okay.

MS. OPIE: And yes—and that's the first time that I don't use the colored backgrounds, but use fabric. Because of the breakup with Pam, I keep drawing two stick-figure girls in the house, over and over again. Every phone conversation, I'm doodling it; it's all being doodled, all the time.

At that point, I'm playing really heavy in the dungeons. And I'm playing with this woman by the name Ian Carter. She's a history graduate student at UC Irvine. And she kind of becomes my girlfriend, but we have an open relationship. So I'm playing with lots of other people and we kind of do things. And I start making portraits, '92, in San Francisco, come home, work at Irvine. Ask my dear friend Judie Bamber to do the stick figure-cutting on my back of what I had been doodling on a pad. I didn't want anybody from the leather community to do it. This is like '93 now, and we make it, beginning of '93, because I wanted it to be tentative. I wanted it not to be as deep. I didn't want it to be precise.

And so I get the green backdrop. I bought all my fabric in Diamond Foam & Fabric. The owner was always amazing and gave me an incredible discount when I told him I was an artist. Then he would start just giving me fabric, and I would bring him a print of the image. So he was really cool; he helped me out. And I was trading.

And Judie came over. I set the four-by-five camera up. I taught my other good friend, who was a professor at UC Irvine, Connie Samaras, how to put the film holders in and out, because at that point, she wasn't shooting large format. So I set everything up, tested it with Polaroid. But you can't do a self-portrait with a four-by-five camera. You can, but it would be very hard. So I had it all set up and then stacked the four-by-five holders with film. Once Judie did the cutting, Connie did the sheets of four by five of the cutting with the backdrop. And my friend, my good friends who I'd photographed, Mike and Sky, were there helping Judie do the cutting. So even though they were totally willing to cut me, because we were heavy-duty players together, it was really important that Judie did it.

At this point, Judie's starting to think about going out with women as well, or might have started going out with a woman. She and Tim broke up. And so that really became this very monumental piece for me, along with the *Portraits*.

Ralph Rugoff puts me in a group show.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Where?

MS. OPIE: In Europe. You'd have to look at my CV. But he tells Regen Projects about me. So he goes over, and he tells Stuart and Shaun, in '92-'93, "You've got to go do a studio visit with this person." And so Shaun does. And they put me in a very important summer group show of Jennifer Pastor, Toba Khedoori, and myself, and Frances Stark. So it's the four of us in the show at Regen together. And I think it's called *Invitational* [93]. Shaun curated it. So Stuart didn't do this. It was all women artists that Shaun had picked.

The Nortons came in and immediately bought all of the pieces of mine that were up. But it wasn't self-portrait cutting yet. I hadn't put that out in the world yet. I was working towards a solo show, getting a body of work. So these were just the first few pieces in a group show.

And my life was forever changed after that Regen Project show. It was amazing. Right away, Stuart took me for a walk around the block. At this point, I'm trying to show at Jan Kesner's, thinking, Okay, I need a photo gallery. Because that's what photographers did.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Right.

MS. OPIE: And I was a photographer.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Right.

MS. OPIE: So Stuart took me for a walk around the block, and he said, “So we want to work with you. We want to represent you.” And I didn’t really know what to say, because I wasn’t really thinking about any of this. I was just excited that I got to be in this group show. And so I was like, “Oh, that seems good.” I was like, “Oh, that seems good.” And I go home and I called Judie, because Judie is showing. Her and Tim are in the gallery system.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That’s right.

MS. OPIE: Tim was with Kuhlenschmidt. They’re in the gallery system. They know the art world in that way. I don’t know the art world in that way at all. So I said, “Judie, I don’t know if I did the right thing, but Regen Projects wants to represent me and I said yes. Was that bad of me, or was that a good thing; is that okay?” And she’s like, “Fuck you.” [They laugh.] She’s like, “A, you should know this, that they’re like the best gallery in LA, and yes, that’s a really good thing and I’m pretty fairly jealous of you.” It was like, “Okay.”

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] And were they already on—I can’t remember—where was—

MS. OPIE: They had just opened the space that’s their little storage space now, behind—they had just moved to Almont from the bigger place because the crash happened, and Stuart downsized after the Sue Williams show. It was right after the Sue Williams show that I think they moved to this smaller place. But before, they were across from Art Catalogs. Remember that it was Art Catalogs and Regen?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, yes, now it’s coming back to me. So they’re on Almont in a small space.

MS. OPIE: So they moved to Almont, just became Regen Projects. So from Stuart Regen Gallery to Regen Projects. And at this point, Stuart’s sick—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —with cancer.

MS. OPIE: We don’t know that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: With a cancer that kills him. You don’t know that.

MS. OPIE: We don’t know it, but later it’s revealed to all of us. But I don’t know it. And I had already promised a gallery in San Francisco that I would do a *Portraits* show with them. Before that, the only other shows I had in a gallery was a women[s] collective gallery where I [showed] *Being and Having*, in New York, which ended up in *Artforum*, with an article that was written. And then the show at Beyond Baroque. And so that my next solo show is—I’m going to forget his name, which is horrible, but it’s this really great space in San Francisco—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Jack Hanley?

MS. OPIE: No, not Jack Hanley.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I have *Being and Having*—

MS. OPIE: Kiki Gallery.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Kiki Gallery, okay.

MS. OPIE: So Stuart rents me a Lincoln Town Car to pack all the photographs into to bring to San Francisco. So he rents me this big huge Lincoln Town Car, and I drive all the work up to Kiki Gallery. And I mount it. It's Rick's place. And Rick ended up later dying from AIDS.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Rick who?

MS. OPIE: I forget his name. That's the horrible thing. I'm bad with names. [Jacobsen—CO.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But we'll find it.

MS. OPIE: And Jerome Caja, who I went to school with at San Francisco Art Institute, who I've also photographed in the *Portraits* series, has the back room. He hosts all of the people at his opening from a bathtub drinking champagne. And I'm in the front room, and it's all of those portraits that I had made in San Francisco over a three-year summer period of time, as well as the portraits in LA—are shown together for the first time and talked about, written about. And then it followed with a solo show at Regen Projects of the work.

And that's where I show *Self-Portrait/Cutting* for the first time.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that seems to be a photograph that really gets a tremendous amount of attention. It's reproduced widely.

MS. OPIE: Widely. I had always this fear, by doing this body of work, that I would never be able to get a full-time teaching job. When I started the portrait series, I was like, Well, this is it. Fuck it. It's too important to me. I have to make it. And I'm always telling students, "Listen, you actually need to not operate from a place of fear, but you always have to operate as an artist, from a place of what is important to you. And that's what you have to remember first and foremost."

I did that at a very young age without a lot of support around me. I was starting this body of work that came out of completely an emotional place of feeling that, with the AIDS epidemic and the way that queers were being demonized, especially the leather community being demonized in a certain way, that I utterly had to make these very formal, beautiful portraits of my friends. That history was going to go away. This time period was so very precious. And so I decided to leave all the urban stuff on the back burner and do it, and spent from, basically, 1990, '91, to '95 making them. And then starting the *Freeways* in '94 and '95.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So here you are still somewhat inexperienced—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —and the response was enormous, in good and bad ways.

MS. OPIE: Huge.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did that affect you as an artist, to have so much critical response when you just weren't really used to it yet?

MS. OPIE: It was scary. It was hard. It made me nervous, and I didn't really enjoy being completely defined as the young leather dyke photographer of my generation. Again, in the same way, identity is very fluid for me. So in the same way that I can be a camp counselor and a leather dyke at the same time, I didn't want to just be the poster child of the leather community at this time period. I was perfectly happy to be making this work and that it was important and so well received. But the

first place [*Self-Portrait*]/*Pervert* ever showed was in the 1995 Whitney Biennial.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And *Pervert* were—

MS. OPIE: I have "pervert" carved on my chest with needles and a leather mask on. And I make it in San Francisco, in the third summer of the studio I ran.

It's a very different piece than *Self-Portrait/Cutting*. It's a much bolder piece, much harder piece. I was getting extremely upset in relationship to how the leather community was being portrayed. We were coming off the heels of Helms—of Jesse Helms. We were coming off—we were just at the beginning of the Clinton era. We were coming off of a just extreme homophobia, and I felt like if my friend Steak tattooed "dyke" on the back of her neck, that I would have "pervert" carved on my chest. And I would become like Holbein [for] Henry VIII; I would be the warrior. I was going to be the pervert warrior out there for us.

So I made it in relationship to just wanting to be unbelievably brave in relationship to my identity for the leather community and to make a portrait that was both utterly beautiful and tough at the same time. Never wanted it to be horrifying. So many people were so scared of meeting me after that portrait. It was fascinating to me. That's what really bothered me about it. They had assumed my personality from a picture. All of those assumptions were based upon how I would be.

So interviewers would come and interview me, and then afterwards, they would be like, "You're so nice." I'd be like, "Well, why wouldn't I be nice?" That was a little unsettling. That was the hard stuff for me. And I think that's why I switched back to urban work immediately, by doing the *Freeways*, something quieter, something less personal, something that I knew, a territory that I had been involved in for a long time of looking that I could return to and be held in that quiet place, because [if] I didn't do that, I felt that I was only going to be one dimensional as an artist. And I wasn't interested in being a one-dimensional artist.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So how many years did you do the *Portraits* before you switched to the *Freeways*, four years?

MS. OPIE: Yes, from—well, *Being and Having*, 1990, to—I stopped the *Portraits* in '95, and I started the *Freeways* in '94. That was also because I was commuting to Irvine. So I was on that long commute. And I was looking at freeways. I took five freeways to get to work. I was very aware of them and wanted to photograph them in a way that created the way—I'm really interested in the idea of what is iconic. I'm fascinated by it, I think in the same way my dad collected the Lincoln ferrotypes that are iconic in relationship to kind of a political record.

What do we look at in terms of record, and how do we hold history? The same way that I might look at the Hine picture of the girls in the mills that taught us everything about child labor laws and actually changed it, I've always been really interested in the possibility of photography creating a history, and what that does in relationship to ideas of representation. And also how communities are formed.

And so, in my head, history—history is always the same. But at the same time, I think that documentary, as a place of photography, hadn't been pushed enough on a conceptual level. So by using Holbein for the portraits of my friends, it created a different context for us to enter the work than just photographs of leather community in their bedrooms with their whips hanging around them, which would be utterly what we would think of as the documentary mode of photographing that community.

I'm always wanting to recontextualize the notion of what is iconic by creating not only this utter kind of seduction of beauty of us entering the work, but then a way for us to recontextualize the way that we actually look at things. So we could actually look at a pierced and tattooed person at that time period, in 1992, and find it utterly beautiful because I contextualized it that way, instead of them being like, whoa, dangerous and freaky and wrong. We can look at a freeway and realize that our commute doesn't have to be so bad, that we can enter the space and create a different kind of vision formula in it. And I think that that's something that I've always done with work, that I'm really interested in doing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, the *Freeways* take the look as though they almost go back to the origins of photography. So they almost have—

MS. OPIE: They are 19th century and they're having a conversation, but also the platinum printing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how do you think the response was when you switched from this very color-confrontational portrait work to these subdued *Freeways*? How did Stuart and Shaun Regen respond?

MS. OPIE: Well, Stuart and Shaun liked them. They thought they were beautiful, and they didn't have a problem selling them.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: They didn't.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.] So that always helps with the galleries. But I think they were a little confused, like, Okay, who do we have here as an artist?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Right.

MS. OPIE: Like, Wow, that's a pretty big shift.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: I remember the first place that they showed was at Long Beach Museum in a show called *Love in the Ruins*. And I remember standing somewhat close to the work, but not too close to the work, and overhearing people looking at the wall label going, "Oh, they got this wrong. This isn't Catherine Opie."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: "This isn't her work." And I'd just be like, Yes, that's good.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: But the beauty of Stuart and Shaun is that it's always about the artist, first and foremost. It's like, "Okay, we're going"—I don't think it was just about selling it. I think that they believed in me as an artist. Like they were like, "Okay, we're going to ride this out. We're going to ride it out." I would go in and out of portraits to landscape, and I would—I continue to do that.

They were just there the whole time of it. And interestingly enough, though, in my history of Regen Projects and all the history of the black-and-white work I've made, they've never done a black-and-white show. There's never—the *Freeways*, they did not show; the *Mini-Malls*, they did not show. They showed those at MOCA. That was my first solo museum show; I won the Citibank Emerging

Artist Award. And so Elizabeth Smith—great, fantastic curator, Elizabeth Smith—curated that show; so lucky to have done that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That was very controversial, I remember, because people in the community said that MOCA was being timid by giving you the award for the *Freeways* work, when, in fact, the award should have gone to you for the portrait work, that they—

MS. OPIE: Oh, I didn't know that, that that was discussed like that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —they hadn't been bold enough to—

MS. OPIE: —to go for it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —to step to the plate and say, We're endorsing this portrait, this very in-your-face portrait work. They're going for the subdued references to an earlier era in photography. Have you ever heard that?

MS. OPIE: I never heard that. I didn't even know that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The whole controversy roiling around you without you.

MS. OPIE: Yes. I didn't know that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, I like the *Freeways* work. It's beautiful, and that was a big—and that's interesting about MOCA, too, at that point, that it wouldn't take a stand on work that was so significant and so early in your career.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I mean, it's your third body of mature work.

MS. OPIE: Yes, exactly. It was pretty big. I was shocked that I got it. When Elizabeth called me and told me that—because they were doing studio visits, and I knew I was being considered, but then when I was told that I actually got it and I would be having this solo show at MOCA with a catalogue, it was just—I just couldn't even believe it. I couldn't even believe that that was even an iota of a possibility of having that kind of career where I would have a solo museum show.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm going to pause here.

[Audio break.]

Cathy, we've taken a little break and we're back. And we're talking about the *Freeways*.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then suddenly the *Portraits* and the *Freeways* are shown together in Ghent, Belgium.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The *Portraits* are shown at Massimo De Carlo in Milan. The *Portraits* are shown at Parco in Tokyo and at Enterprise in New York. Suddenly, you're all over the place. So up till 1994, really, the shows are few and far between, and then suddenly you're all over Europe.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How does that affect you as a person and as an artist?

MS. OPIE: Well, I think that it was amazing to have that kind of attention, but it's also some—I don't know. I think that there's a lot of—I have an ability for a lot of self-preservation and that's to [not] be gobbled up, because I think that I learned a lot about self-preserv[ation] as a kid. And so even though that was becoming my life, my goals were still just like, I need a full-time teaching job. I need to stop working as a lab tech at UC Irvine. There were certain things that I wanted. I was utterly in love with Kaucyila Brooke, and I was with her at the time.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, let's pause for a second and say when did you meet Kaucyila, because I know—

MS. OPIE: Kaucyila, yes, big relationship, the biggest relationship, except for Julie [who I am] going with now. Kaucyila I met when I was a grad student at CalArts.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh.

MS. OPIE: She came in to teach. She was up for a teaching job there, and instead she got a teaching job at UCSD. I had a mad crush on her when I was a grad student. And I would take the train down to San Diego and help her print fiber-based black and white of her work, and just was utterly in love with her.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you say fiber-based, you mean on paper?

MS. OPIE: Yes, fiber-based, on paper—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's a phrase that you used when you're talking about printing on paper—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —as opposed to printing on—

MS. OPIE: Well, it's photographic paper, still emulsion laid on paper, but it's what you want your best black-and-white prints to be on, fiber-based, unless you're platinum printing and you are printing on an archival acid-free paper.

So I was helping her print, because I had a mad crush on her, and I was telling everybody at CalArts that Kaucyila Brooke was going to be the woman that I marry. And then I got together with Pam. And Kaucyila got together with Jane; she was with Jane for 10 years. So Jane and Kaucyila break up. And I'm their best friend.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I can't remember Jane's last name.

MS. OPIE: Jane Cottis.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Jane?

MS. OPIE: Cottis.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Cottis.

MS. OPIE: And they're my best friends. I hang out with them. We do holidays together. We're just best friends. Then Jane and Kaucyila break up, and it's a big deal. Being Kaucyila's best friend, I'm there, helping her move, actually, on Sanborn. She moves onto Sanborn—where she still lives to this day—Ave., right down from Ron Athey, right around—like four doors down from where I used to live with Pam. And I'm not really thinking about her romantically, but she's always somebody that was my best friend. And one night, we do mushrooms and we start making out on the couch, and after that we were just together.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what year was that?

MS. OPIE: This is probably '94, '95, I'm making the *Freeways* at the time. Yes, '95, maybe '94, '95 we're on there. I was dating Pam for a while, that on-again, off-again relationship, but it wasn't going anywhere. And so, yes, utterly fell in love with Kaucyila and was—it was a good relationship and a hard relationship.

She's nine years older than I am. I was getting an enormous amount of attention in the art world. She's also an artist, a photographer. It was a little tough. She was also looked at by MOCA for the Citibank Emerging Artist Award. I got it. She didn't. I think it was difficult. It was really hard for her. And I really wanted to marry her. I wanted a life with her. I wanted to have kids. And she went off to Banff. We were together for three years, and she went off to Banff on an art residence, and she had an affair and lied about it. And a lot of tumultuous stuff happened. I hung in there for a little while, but then she kept lying, and the lies kept building up.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So she was having affairs while you were together?

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're living together, though.

MS. OPIE: No, we never lived together. I was still on Catalina. We were [in Bowery? —CO] to buy a house together. My dad had just given me \$40,000 cash and wished us well and loved Kaucyila and wanted me to go to the next phase in my life. He was really proud of me. He had never given me money. He had never put me through college or anything like this. So this was a big thing for him to just give me \$40,000 for a down payment on a house. We were looking in West Adams, actually.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So this would have been about 19—

MS. OPIE: Ninety-seven.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: Looking in West Adams, wanting to buy a house, wanting to settle down, gave her a big diamond, got on my knee, asked her to marry me. She goes off to Banff. She has an affair. Lies and lies and lies. After a year of torture, of it just being horrible and me thinking I was going to lose my mind—I am working at Irvine, but also teaching adjunct at UCLA, which Connie Samaras got me. And I got offered the Freund Fellowship at Wash. U.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm sorry, the what?

MS. OPIE: Freund, Freund Fellowship. It's named after a family, I think.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: At where?

MS. OPIE: At Washington University in St. Louis.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

MS. OPIE: And so Kaucyila and I are officially broken up. I—oh, here is a great thing that happened. I make lesbian *Domestic*. I buy an RV and I travel around for three and a half months, around the United States.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, for clarity, we have to pause. You finished the *Freeways*. And—

MS. OPIE: I finished the *Freeways*. I finished the *Mini-Malls*.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes. And just to pause, we were talking about the fact that you did a body of work documenting the mini-malls around—

MS. OPIE: —around Los Angeles.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —around Los Angeles.

MS. OPIE: With a seven-by-17-inch Banquet camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What kind of camera?

MS. OPIE: Banquet. It's called the Banquet camera, but it's a—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because it makes a long —

MS. OPIE: Yes, it actually makes a seven-by-17-inch negative. It's a really intense large-format camera. It was made by amazing camera-maker in Arizona named Keith Canham. And he also made my eight-by-10 camera that I shot with.

So I'm going a little bit farther technically in that direction, just stretching myself, hand-developing in trays the seven-by-17 film. I do the *Mini-Malls*. That's what MOCA show was, *Mini-Malls* and the *Freeways* together. Kaucyila was my date for the opening. We looked fabulous together.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] Well, before we go to the next—let's stop and just take a quick moment to review the *Mini-Malls* and why you did them, because I think that they're quite a contrast, again, to the *Freeways*.

MS. OPIE: Yes, they're different.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Although they are technically extraordinary, they're jarring because they go back to the New Topographics for which the Los Angeles area is so well known. This is not something anybody wants to look at.

MS. OPIE: No, mini-malls are just like leather people. They're like—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Worst.

MS. OPIE: They're worst. They're like the bastards of architecture. It's the worst architecture in the world.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Why did you photograph them?

MS. OPIE: Because they are the defining place of Los Angeles in relationship to how communities are developed and neighborhoods are developed here. That when you look at the suburban mini-malls, they have no heart. They have no soul. They are Jamba Juice—bagels, the Starbucks. But when you look at the Los Angeles mini-malls, they actually become the community center for what represents the American dream. So they are literally the mom-and-pop shops of what we talk about in relationship to an immigrant community and the American dream. And it is where you find the best sushi. It's where you find the best noodle huts. It's where you end up taking collectors from New York to, and they can't believe they're going to a mini-mall to eat, but then they're blown away.

So to me, it was a way to begin to look back into the early work of the master plan, and work in relationship to that that I had done, and still be able to use the city in the same way that I describe my own queer community, as a place that community begins to get discussed in relationship to—and kind of an older history of photography that came out of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, which is the signage.

They were shot Sunday morning, emptied out, no cars. I would go out very, very early in the morning. I wanted to map out LA geographically in relationship to the communities and the neighborhood through the signage and the facades of the mini-mall. So that's why I made them, as another way to begin to discuss community and how community has developed.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did you discover the camera before the mini-mall or the mini-mall—how did you decide to choose that camera?

MS. OPIE: I chose mini-malls, but I didn't want to shoot it with the camera that I was shooting the freeways with. I wanted to up my game a little bit. So the *Freeways* were shot with a Fuji G617, which is a six-centimeter-by-17-centimeter negative. The *Freeways* prints are actually contact prints, platinum prints. I thought I was going to platinum-print the *Mini-Malls* as well, so I needed a bigger negative, thus going to the seven-by-17-inch negative. And I thought, "Oh, this will be beautiful platinum prints." But I didn't like the history of the platinum in *Mini-Malls*. I felt like it created too much of a kind of a 19th-century history in relationship to photography that worked with the *Freeways*, but was not working at all with the *Mini-Malls*.

And *Mini-Malls*, because of—at that point, technology, people started printing [with the] Iris [printer], and so there was a drum scanner big enough to scan the negative. It was like a way of marrying old technology with new technology and actually making a larger-scale print with the seven-by-17 negative because of being able to Iris-print.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you refer to Iris print, you're talking about digital printing?

MS. OPIE: Digital printing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: They're all digitally printed.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So they're shot with these large seven-by-17 negatives.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then how did you end up printing the negative to the Iris printer?

MS. OPIE: They were scanned, drum-scanned, with a very large drum scanner.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You could do that in 1996?

MS. OPIE: Seven, '97. You could do that. Yes, '96, '97. And Chip Leavitt worked with Randy at—God, I have to look up the history of who printed them, but they printed them. So they scanned them and printed them, and I was utterly happy, because I wasn't happy with Epson prints at that point. The Epson hadn't figured out the blacks. The blacks laid on the surface. There wasn't a photographic black. It wasn't deep. I didn't like it. I didn't like the inks.

Iris was the best thing going. At that point, a lot of people were doing Iris prints. It was a popular way to print. And with the black-and-whites, I didn't have to worry that much about the UV or the archivalness of it because the first thing that goes in an Iris print are the reds. And so because they were black and white, they were on the same tonal range; I wasn't that concerned in relationship to archival.

Also with color photography, back in the day, I was printing EP-2 and RA-4. And those prints—we all know what a 1990 C-print looks like.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Unfortunately, that's true.

MS. OPIE: It has a patina. Which, ironic, I like the patina. I like the history of that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you have—this work is shown at MOCA, great fanfare; you and Kaucyila look fabulous. You go to the opening. And then you find out she's having these affairs.

MS. OPIE: Afterwards, after that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But the relationship is going on for years after this, after the proposal, after the house-hunting, everything—

MS. OPIE: On and off, in a weird way. It took me leaving, took me moving out of LA, for it to finally cut, even though it was hard.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So off and on, you were together from, say, '94 to what, 2001?

MS. OPIE: There was a potential for us to get back together in 2001, and I said no. I just couldn't do it. She came to New York. I was teaching at Yale.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, let's pause for a second before you go there.

MS. OPIE: Let's go to *Domestic*, because that was the heartbreak.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That we're going to do. We're going to say, here you are in this tumultuous relationship, and you start—

MS. OPIE: I buy an RV—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —you've decided to do *Domestic*.

MS. OPIE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Because I'm going to buy a house. I'm going to leave, and I'm going to have a domestic relationship, something I've always wanted—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: —from the time that I did the cutting on my back. All I ever wanted was a home and children; that just was my idea. I wanted that part of the American dream. And even though I was queer and you're not supposed to want that, that's what I wanted.

So I buy an RV. A good friend of mine, Amy Goldstein's mother, trades me an unseen portfolio of landscapes that I will make on my trek across the United States for the money to buy the RV.

So I quit my work. I've saved up. I figured out a lecture schedule that they'll pay me in cash as I go along the way, and then that's what I'll use for gas money and food money. So my beloved Australian Shepherd that I got right after graduation from CalArts—because I was only going to get a dog again when I could actually have a dog the whole time, after losing all my beloved dogs when I was a kid—so my Aussie Shepherd, Nika, and I get in this RV—she hated the whole thing—and we traveled across America for three and a half months photographing lesbian couples with an eight-by-10 camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You start doing that in 1996?

MS. OPIE: Ninety-seven, I think, right? The show was in '98, *Domestic*.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: And I'm lonely. Kaucyila was on her way to Banff. I get her to go with me for the first leg of the journey, but we're arguing. She's not happy about being in an RV. So she goes off and does her own thing, and we just know that we'll come back together, and we'll buy a house together. Meanwhile, I'm going to go photograph lesbian domestic couples together with an eight-by-10 camera, to have a conversation with Tina Barney, and to correct the history of MoMA's photography with *Terror and Pleasure and Domestic Comfort*, or whatever that show is called. *Comfort, Domestic Comfort? Pleasure and—[Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort]*.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes *Domestic*—

MS. OPIE: It was a Peter Galassi show.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No, I know exactly what you're talking about. But carry on. We know.

MS. OPIE: And was void of queer. It was void—and then I had been making really intense black-and-whites for a while, [so] that I wanted to go back to color, and I wanted to go back to my community. It just felt like the right thing to do.

So I planned out the trip, give a little piece of America within it, and made this body of work. So before Thanksgiving or so, during it, I realized—I kept having dreams about Kaucyila having affairs. I just kept having these really intense dreams. I would call her up and I'd say, "Okay, look, I know you're rational and that you've always been honest to me and that you're my best friend for 10 years before we got together, but I keep having these dreams. I just have to ask you. Are you having an affair?" "No, honey, no, I'm not. No, I'm not."

On the end of the trip, we meet up in San Francisco, because we're going to lecture about being lesbian photographers and lovers together at San Francisco Art Institute. We're going to do this big lecture about what it's been like for us to traverse this, to do the work. And you have to realize that I've also been one of her main models in all her bodies of work, including—she just had a retrospective in Germany, and I'm "Madam" of this big body of work *Madam and Eve*.

So she tells me right before we go on stage together at the Art Institute that, yes, indeed, she has been having an affair, but that it's over with and that I don't need to worry about it—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Before the lecture. [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: —and she loves me. And it's all going to be okay. And I'm like, Oh, shit, shit, shit. I said, "Okay." I said—I've had open relationships at this point. Then I'm like, "Okay, well, if you're not in love with this person and it's over with, then I'm okay with that." And so that was that.

So I go back to LA—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Remember when this lecture was?

MS. OPIE: I don't remember what it was called—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When was it?

MS. OPIE: When? Probably '97, at San Francisco Art Institute. And so I feel okay. I feel like, Okay, I'm not losing her. It's all going to be okay. I get back home. I start printing *Domestic*. It gets to the time where we're supposed to start looking for a house and move in together. And she says, "After all of this, I think we've got to wait for a little while to get us back on even ground." And I said, "Are you sure you're not—like, what's going on? Are you sure this is over with?" And she's like, "Yes, it's over with. It's over with." And, "I'm going to go visit my dad in Oregon." And no, it's not over with. I break into her email, because that's what paranoid lovers do. They break into other people's emails. When you know that you're not supposed to read your lover's journal or the email or anything like that—I can't help myself.

I know she's going to be so mad at me for breaking into her email that I call her at CalArts while she's teaching, and I tell her a lie. I said, "So your lover, Jay, just got a hold of me and told me everything that's going on between you two and that you're now his and not mine." And I make up this whole elaborate lie. And then, Crystal Cross, my good buddy, was just like, "You've got to call her back and tell her the truth." And meanwhile I have all these love-letter emails printed out, and I'm just, like, gutted. And I'm just like, Shit, shit, shit. So I call her back, and I said, "Okay, Jay didn't call me. I broke into your email." And then, of course, she was very angry with me about that.

And so I said, "Look, I think we have to—what is this? Is this over with? What's going on? What are you doing?" And she's like, "No, no, no, I love you. We're going to move forward. We're going to move forward."

Then I found out that she would be traveling and speaking to me with him. And I would just be like, "This is crazy, Kaucyila. This is—I can't do this. I can't do this."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you say him, you're referring to the identity of a female lover of Kaucyila or a male?

MS. OPIE: No, male.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Male lover of Kaucyila.

MS. OPIE: Male lover. Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So not only she's seeing someone else, she's seeing a man.

MS. OPIE: For the first time in her life.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Ah.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

MS. OPIE: So, never really had boyfriend before.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay, so that must have been even more confusing for everybody.

MS. OPIE: Yes. It's pretty fucked up. So I ended up—basically—I got the Freund Fellowship. I was going to live in St. Louis for a month in the fall and a month in the spring. And I made the body of work with [writer] Rochelle Steiner of *St. Louis*, which is a body of work basically based around the identity of the World's Fair. And at this point, actually, unlike the MOCA thing, I am censured from queer work. So upon me receiving the fellowship, Rochelle, unfortunately, had the horrible task of saying to me that I could not do queer work for this show.

So even though I had made lesbian *Domestic*, they were very clear in the interviewing process that the trustees and the board people—it would not go over very well if I made queer work.

So it's the first time that I'm being told like, "Guess what? You"—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: By this time, it was like 1998—

MS. OPIE: Eight, '99.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —'99, I mean by this—

MS. OPIE: Ninety-eight, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Year 2000 was the show; so it must have been 1999.

MS. OPIE: Yes. At this point also, I'm going out with Daphne Fitzpatrick. So even though Kaucyila and I are on the rocks and we're going back and forth like this, I, meanwhile, while I had a show in Australia, started having a long-distance relationship with Daphne Fitzpatrick, who was Bob Gober's assistant.

She was there installing Bob's piece, and we had this fabulous two-week—week-and-a-half—romance in Australia. We took a road trip together, and we were just having a great time. We were having fun.

So I was having this kind of long-distance romance with Daphne while I was figuring out Kaucyila and while I was—so in St. Louis, I start photographing and I say, "Oh, it's Okay. I don't have to make queer work. I do other things. I've been doing other things for a while. And I want to make a work based on the World's Fair and its relationship to its identity of St. Louis at this point. And I want to work with my seven-by-17 camera again."

So I do that. And guess who I meet in St. Louis? Julie Burleigh. [They laugh.] She's straight. She's a painter. She's super cute. I kept telling Kaucyila and Daphne, like, "Oh, my God, I met this girl. She's so cool. I hang out with her all the time. Her name is Julie." And they're like, "Well, what do you mean you hang out with her all the time?" And even though Kaucyila and I weren't officially together,

Daphne and I were still together. Kaucyila and I were still completely, utterly tied together as girlfriends in a way that Daphne was fun and my long-distance relationship.

So I keep thinking about Julie Burleigh. My gosh, she's so nice. Julie's so nice. And we go to the movies together. We both have dogs and we hang out together and we like each other and we talk to each other. But it's just like, Oh, no, she's straight. She's straight.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because—is Julie married at this point?

MS. OPIE: No, she's not married. I know that she has a daughter.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: She's divorced.

MS. OPIE: She divorced early when Sarah—she had Sarah when she was 18, our daughter—I got to inherit beautiful Sarah. And she has been a single mom, got herself through a bachelor's degree and a master's degree as a single mom, and is now teaching at Wash. U. And it's the first time that her and her daughter have lived apart from one another.

It's the first time that Julie ever, as a person—even though she had a long, 10-year relationship with a guy named Sam in Chicago, it's the first time that she's ever lived alone as an adult, because she always was a mom. She went from her parents' house to being pregnant at 18, and then being—never having that kind of autonomous space.

And she had this inkling in the back of her head. She said to herself, somewhere in her 20s, that maybe she would be a lesbian in her 40s. [They laugh.] So Julie keeps going out on this date with this guy that she does yoga with and she keeps thinking about me. I am at this point figuring out how to leave LA, because I have to leave LA because I'm utterly in love with Kaucyila, but I'm going out with Daphne. And I'm just making work and I'm a mess, right. So I'm just like, Whoa, what is going on? I really like Daphne, and I feel like, Okay, Daphne's going to be my future. I've got to figure out how to move to New York.

So a job comes up at Yale for photography. And out of the blue, thinking I would never get it at all because I didn't get any—I was first trying to get the job at UCLA that Jim Welling got. So I was up for that job, but Jim got it. And so I was like, Okay, I'm not going to find a job in my hometown. I can't stay in LA. I have to leave LA in order to get a teaching job. And I needed to leave LA for emotional reasons, anyway, because I was just too tied in with the whole Kaucyila thing.

And so I get the job at Yale. I totally get the job at Yale. And it was just shocking. It was shocking to everybody.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It was a full-time job?

MS. OPIE: Full-time job, assistant professor.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: In 2001.

MS. OPIE: In 2000–2001. So Daphne and I—we go on a road trip in 1999, where I make the body of work—

[End of track.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is Hunter Drohojowska-Philp interviewing Catherine Opie at the

artist's studio in the West Adams district of Los Angeles, California, on August 13, 2012, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Card number three.

So Cathy, we were—

MS. OPIE: Yes—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —talking about—

MS. OPIE: —my torrid love life and how it weaves in and out of all places I've lived. [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You were saying that—actually, we're talking about Yale and how you're enjoying being in New York and you're enjoying teaching at Yale a little bit and that you got this call from James Welling asking you to apply for UCLA. You said it had always been your dream job.

MS. OPIE: Always.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But why would that be a dream job if you already have a job at Yale, which would be considered by most people to be so incredibly prestigious?

MS. OPIE: Because of who taught at UCLA. I just think, to this day, it was one of the most phenomenal art departments you could ever imagine teaching in. I had taught adjunct there, so I've already worked with the students and already knew what the faculty was like. And then when I was up for the job that James ended up getting, I was just like, Oh, well, that's that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And who was teaching there when you were asked to apply? This would have been 2001?

MS. OPIE: Two thousand one—I guess 2000. Jim asked me to apply, but I had already been offered early on—December—Yale offered me the position, after I applied for it. And so I don't know who was adjunct, but it was just James Welling at UCLA. And before that, they didn't have a full-time professor, except for Heinecken, who was well retired. So they were basically just putting it together with adjunct professors for photo at UCLA after Heinecken.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But who was at UCLA that made you want to go be there as well?

MS. OPIE: Well, Lari Pittman, Nancy Rubins, Chris—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Chris Burden?

MS. OPIE: —Chris Burden, Mary Kelly. I liked Patty. Paul McCarthy—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Patty—

MS. OPIE: —Wickman.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —Wickman.

MS. OPIE: Roger Herman.

It was a phenomenal group of artists, and I just really liked the way that they taught studio art. I really believe in that method of where, with the grad students, you're one on one. But I didn't get it,

so I left, and I decided I needed a full-time teaching job, and it wasn't going to happen at Irvine, and it wasn't going to happen anywhere else. There weren't any other positions open.

I didn't want to try to teach at CalArts, because I don't believe in teaching where you came from. I think you'll never be anything but the student, and that was part of the relationship with Catherine Lord and I as well: I was the photo lab tech, but I wasn't ever going to be, in her mind, somebody who would be the professor, the head of photography at UC Irvine.

So I go to Yale. It's all good. I get to teach with Gregory Crewdson, who, it turns out, was darkroom mates with my ex-lover from San Francisco Art Institute, Paola Ferrario.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: So when he was in grad school with her, they were darkroom mates. Apparently, she kicked him in the face, because she just couldn't stand him. But I like Greg. And I think P-L diCorcia is amazing and a train wreck all at the same time. And Tod Papageorge is Tod Papageorge.

During the interview, it was really funny because he was looking at my résumé and was like, "So, you came out of San Francisco Art Institute in the '80s, and a lot of you were applying to Yale. Why did you not apply to Yale?" And I said, "Tod, I did, and I didn't get in." And he looked at me, and that's how I knew I kind of nailed the job interview. He said, "Well, we're not going to make that mistake twice, are we?" And I was like, I think I'm going to get this job. [They laugh.]

So it was an incredible moment to call my parents, as somebody who graduated from high school in the place that I graduated from, to tell them that my first professorship, my first full-time professorship was going to be at Yale University. It was an incredible coup for me. I felt even though Daphne and I were breaking up and it wasn't working out on that front, on the domestic front, careerwise, I was going to be a Yale professor.

And so I said to Jim, "I took this job at Yale. I'm sorry, you're just —" and he goes, "Well, can't you apply anyway, and then if you get the job, just tell Yale no?" And I said, "No, I actually can't do that. They went through a search. They put a lot of effort into that search. And I actually believe that I need to honor that."

So I went to Yale; I made friends. I did a really good job there. And Jim came back to me, and they had done a search, and they had come up with a consensus of who to hire. So he said, "Well, the department is still interested in whether or not—how's Yale going? Are you interested in applying for UCLA?"

At this point, my relationship fell apart with Daphne. I'm trying to get pregnant with Rodney Hill, who is the director of Gorney Bravin & Lee with Jay, and who I've known all these years. He was the only decent guy I knew in New York, and I really liked him, and he's fantastic. And I thought, Okay, well, I've found my full-time teaching job and I'm making work, but I'm going to try to have a baby because that's the next thing. And even though I don't have the girlfriend in place, I'll do this. Julie and I are still friends and she's in St. Louis. I start going out with this other woman, Claire—oh, my God, I'm forgetting her last name. Anyway, she owns Toys in Babeland, a sex toys store in New York. And she's fabulous. She's great. She's smart. She's everything you could imagine. But she doesn't fall in love with me.

So Kaucyila, while I'm getting pregnant, is kind of back in the picture, and she's coming to New York to stay with me for a week. At this point, I had applied for the job at UCLA, and I thought pretty

much I was going to get it. And I was going to be leaving Yale and moving back to California. And she said, “Well, we could date when you get back home.” And I said, “Kaucyila, there is no dating at this point. We either have this relationship and you commit to me absolutely, or there’s—it’s done.” And she said, “I can’t do that.” And I said, “Then it’s done.”

So she goes. I’m dating Claire. Julie and I, all within this three-week period of time—this is all three weeks that I’m juggling these three women—and Julie and I have our first date in Chicago, where she comes from. I have my opening at the MCA of the show that travels from the Photographers’ Gallery in London to the MCA that Elizabeth takes and expands. So I’m on the bottom floor of the MCA in Chicago, and Ed Ruscha is across from me. So it’s a very “California wonderful” moment.

Julie and I get together, and she stays in the same hotel room with me, and we kind of start dating. And I go back to Claire and I said, “Listen, I’m dating this other really wonderful woman who lives in St. Louis. I’m trying to get pregnant. I’m at the point in my life that I actually am now—I’m not going to just date anybody anymore. We’re either going to go with this and have a family, or I need to move on.” And Julie, at that point, was telling me that she was in love with me and that she wanted to commit to me, but that I had to figure out what I was doing with the other women. [Laughs.] Which was very sensible of her.

So I waited a month, and Claire and I talked it out, and it was pretty clear that we weren’t going to go forward as a couple. I am making *Wall Street* at this time with a seven-by-17 camera, had no idea that 9/11 was going to happen, obviously; none of us did. And I’m making *Icehouses* at the same time that I’m teaching at Yale.

So I am teaching at Yale, getting on [a] plane [on] the weekends, flying to Minnesota in the middle of the winter, photographing the icehouses, flying back, teaching, and doing this for that two-month window of time—at the same time, making the *Skyways* that are going go with the show at the Walker, working with the curator Douglas Fogle and my beloved Richard Flood, who I’ve known for years.

And so I’m working hard, like I always do. That’s one thing; I’ve always been able to work. And so the love stuff is just doing what it does. I’m getting pregnant because it’s time. And I get pregnant right after my 40th birthday. I’ve at that point commit[ted] completely to Julie—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what year is this?

MS. OPIE: This is 2001.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: So I’ve completely committed to Julie. I have finished *Wall Street*. I have finished the *Icehouses* and *Skyways*. I know, at this point, that I got the UCLA job. I told Yale that I was leaving, and I asked them if they wanted to counteroffer. They said, “No.” I said, “Okay.” They said no right away, and I said, “Do you want to think about it?”

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: I mean, “Do you want to think about this?” I said, “I know what I’m telling you is upsetting. So do you want a week to just think about this?” And they said, “No, you just go ahead and go back to California.” Then the next day—so I called Jim immediately, and I said, “Well, there is no counteroffer, so I accept the position.” And we had to go through all the discussion with the dean and stuff like that in terms of my package, and I’m coming in with tenure, which is what I asked for,

and all of that stuff—a moving package to come back home.

I'm really doing so much, while trying to get pregnant and everything. So Julie and I are committed, and we come back in September of 2001, and we buy this house in West Adams where we're sitting right now.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you come back before 9/11?

MS. OPIE: We come back the week of 9/11. So I returned to a very different New York. At that point, I was preparing *Wall Street* for my next show with Jay Gorney.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Right.

MS. OPIE: And we ended up showing it at an antique—this furniture store downtown, next to 9/11, instead of doing it in the gallery. It was a weird thing to try to show that show in a gallery right after that happened—very odd.

Second time that I made a body of work where something incredibly transforming happened while making it. The first time was '94-'95, the Northridge earthquake happened while I was making the *Freeways*. Freeways collapsed. That ends up being a part of the narrative of the *Freeways* series.

Second time where history has completely transformed immediately is with *Wall Street*. And no longer am I thinking of photography as being important from 100 years from now. I realize that history is just going so fast—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Wow.

MS. OPIE: —in relationship to how images are thought [about] or being looked at.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, interestingly, I'd like to just pause for a moment, ask about the *Icehouses*, because I think they are, again, another leap to a different kind of aesthetic.

MS. OPIE: They were a leap, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And given what you just told us about your personal life and your professional life, how did this come about for you, this enormous—I think transcendently beautiful prints and very difficult to accomplish, I understand, physically—

MS. OPIE: Well, I was shooting with an eight-by-10 camera on the snow during blizzards, yes. They were hard.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did that come about for you? How did that aesthetic shift come about for you?

MS. OPIE: Well, I was working on the ice with them. I was photographing—going in and out of Minnesota. And every time I went home back to New York, I would get the negatives developed, and then I would contact-print up at Yale, and then I would hang them in my studio in New York. I was shooting both vertically and horizontally. And I was shooting both under sun and blizzard when I was there. Then I realized, after hanging them up, that they would only work well vertically, that I had to transform that language. Again, what we think of as iconic, that place of iconic always being embedded in terms of how I begin to peel apart things and think about them.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because we think of landscapes as horizontal?

MS. OPIE: As horizontal, not vertical.

At that point, I had been working panoramically for a number of years. So I thought, What's happening now? What's happening now in terms of ideas of history and photography and even the position of photography in 2001 versus—digital versus analog—is that we are in a fractured state. Once I hung them up, I realized that I only liked the white on white, and then I kept a line consistent within my horizon so that it became an extended landscape that was also about it being a fractured panorama, to a certain extent. Then, visually, it was the aha moment.

But before that, if you look at all the negatives in the body of work, you'll see that I was kind of trying everything. By the third time being out there on the ice, and going home and printing them, I realized what I was looking for and the formula that I was looking for.

So I was the only person flying in [to] Minnesota from New York going like, I really hope there's a blizzard this weekend—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: —and watching the weather and wanting that white on white, wanting that blizzard. And then just editing it so that it became this dance, this kind of perfect expanded landscape where you start close up on the icehouses, and then you go to more intense blizzard all the way down to then just the very last one in the sequence, where it's just a little bit of forest peeking in, as the icehouses are really far away in the distance.

And I realized that I could make this expanse of a landscape with the verticality and horizon line that created this really interesting way for me to think about that also related to Minimalist painting. Because I've always—I'm a huge Ryman fan.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Robert Ryman—

MS. OPIE: Yes, Robert Ryman.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —the painter.

MS. OPIE: Yes, and so I realized that I could do something with true documentary, but conceptually move it to this place that also bumped up against Minimalist painting. The same way of using Holbein as a place of portraiture that I could bump up against with my queer friends.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: So it's that long conversation and just literally being able to mess with that language of photography, of what our expectation of landscape is.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when you moved back to LA—and I guess it would be 2001 that we're talking about—then your next body of work is the *Surfers*.

MS. OPIE: Yes, which was always to be a conversation with *Icehouses*.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I assume because they're the same sort of vertical composition and—

MS. OPIE: Yes, and they're both temporary communities that exist on the water.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: So the *Surfers* end up being—at this point, in terms of community and how also that I've been shifting my own location. I'm not just part of one community. And I've also shifted, at this point, my practice from Los Angeles to looking at other places. I've done *Wall Street*. I did *St. Louis*. I did *Skyways* and *Icehouses*. I'm no longer only looking in my own backyard. I'm not regional anymore. I'm looking at the grander idea of American identity.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But you are back in LA, and the first thing you do is—

MS. OPIE: The *Surfers*.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —probably the most iconic thing about LA, which is the surfing community. Not most—but one of the iconic—

MS. OPIE: Well, yes, because I dance with the iconic of LA. Mini-malls, freeways, and then the Beverly Hills houses.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's right, which we should talk about in relation to this as well. Let's talk about the *Surfers* and then—well, let's talk about both of those. The Beverly Hills houses are so interesting, as you pick all these really rather—almost absurd, I would say, almost absurd examples of what you'd find and—

MS. OPIE: Well, they're portraits. They follow—I did the *Freeways* and the *Mini-Malls*. And then I went back—before I did *Domestic*, I went back and used an eight-by-10 camera to do these Beverly Hills and Bel Air houses.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: In 1995?

MS. OPIE: In '95.

And to me, they're a culmination—they become portraits of another kind of identity, in relationship to the same way that my friends were borrowing different periods of tribal culture through piercing and tattooing, that those Beverly Hills and Bel Air houses borrow from all of this architectural history. And so for me they were on this edge between totally refined eight-by-10, beautiful 40-by-50 prints, but that they almost looked like they could be real estate ads, too.

They're really the most awkward photographs I've ever made. I think the houses win out in awkward photographs of mine. There's no other body of work that I struggled with more than I've made than the houses. They're almost ugly. They're on that edge for me. And I'm utterly interested in the idea of the sublime and beauty and all this kind of other—I tease the line of cliché. I'm constantly teasing that out. I'm very interested in that, in the same way I'm interested in the iconic; I teased almost to cliché. And these were awkward for me.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then, to connect back to the *Surfers*, which is, of course, a cliché of Los Angeles—

MS. OPIE: Yes, but then again, I don't photograph them like that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: No.

MS. OPIE: I don't photograph them in action. I don't photograph the guys on the big waves. I

photographed them in a way that people don't expect—that photograph from 1999 was the thinking point that began the thoughts of this horizon line.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so you were pointing now, in your catalogue from the Guggenheim retrospective, to *Untitled #20*, which is a—

MS. OPIE: In 1999.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what is that a picture of?

MS. OPIE: That is a picture of a foggy lake that I found. And it's utterly kind of mirroring itself, and it's absolutely the cliché photograph that you would see of a foggy lake, almost out of a bad nature magazine. But there's something within it that held me, that I really liked. But again, the horizontal didn't work for it. I should have turned it and made it vertical right away.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, then you look—here, we go to the white-on-white *Icehouses*, but I wanted to go to the *Surfers* because I thought—

MS. OPIE: Can we pause for a sec?

[Audio break.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Perhaps you went back and looked at that foggy lake and had it in the back of your mind when you did the *Surfers*.

MS. OPIE: Well, I knew that I didn't want it under sunshine. I wanted the same palette of the *Icehouses*. It couldn't be white on white obviously, but at least I could try to get blue on blue. So I studied the tide reports. I had to figure out where I was going. I had to figure out what spot the ocean would be the best along PCH [Pacific Coast Highway]. And when the tide would come up, so that it wouldn't [be] just waves, that it would be water to surfer. But then I allowed the shore to appear in the last one, in the same way that I allowed the little bit of woods to appear in the last of the *Icehouses*. I allow that grounding to happen in terms of shore, where you see kelp and sand as the lone, last little surfer figure comes out of the fog.

So in *Icehouses*, it becomes more to a blizzard. In *Surfers*, it gets foggier and foggier.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But you also took portraits of them.

MS. OPIE: It was a big change for me, because I didn't do that with *Icehouses*. And I didn't do that because I was making *Skyways* at the same time. But I realized, while I was making *Surfers*, that I missed making portraits. And also friends were telling me, "Okay, I'm confused by your work because you only make photographs of queer people. So are you trying to say that only queer people exist in the world?" I said, "Actually, I'm not. I'm not at all." And I had just been missing portraits.

So I decided that the *Surfers*, in a certain way, were almost too pretty. They were too—they worked really well with the *Icehouses*, but Shaun already showed the *Icehouses*. So I wasn't going to have my dream room, like I had at the Guggenheim, where they were across from each other. And I needed to ground the work back into a language of documentary.

So for me, making the portraits of the surfers allowed me to bring it back down from just this kind of —insanely beautiful—them as objects. It's great to think about them as objects, but I also needed

to ground them a bit in a language that I feel very identified with, which is a language of documentary.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And so at this point, you're back in LA. You and Julie have settled into your house in West Adams, which you have now.

MS. OPIE: Yes, we have, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you use the money from your father to finally buy the house?

MS. OPIE: I did, along with—I made some other money, but I did save that money from my dad to buy the house. And the house was a good price. It was then within our price range. And we bought it in a way that we knew the backyard was big enough that both of us could build studios in the back. So Julie with having her painting studio and me having my photo studio.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what year did you and Julie buy the house and settle in here?

MS. OPIE: Two thousand one, right when 9/11 happened, we are here buying the house.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my gosh.

MS. OPIE: So I go back to a very different New York City. And I'm there until I'm eight months pregnant in December. But I don't go back to Wall Street, even though everybody kept assuming that I would go back to photograph, after spending a year documenting it. A, I'm pregnant. I don't want to be around all the smoke. And B, it's not the reason why I'd made the body of work of *Wall Street*. And so it would forever just be tied to that, even though it's already tied to that event, because I have that—the bottom of the Trade Towers in that body of work, which I had no idea, the ghostliness, that they would end up—not being there anymore.

Yes, and it was intense.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you get pregnant with Rodney.

MS. OPIE: I do.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You come back here and Julie, presumably, is okay is with the idea of being a mother again?

MS. OPIE: Well, yes, that was a big thing for her. In order for her—in her commitment to me, she had to realize that I was trying to get pregnant and have a baby. And she had to be okay with that. It was a little hard for her to tell Sarah, as you can imagine. She not only had to come out to her family and to her daughter as a lesbian, she also had to tell them that her partner was pregnant. First she came out, and she waited. And she told them I was pregnant.

So I went home the first Christmas—we go home to her house in Church Point, Louisiana, every Christmas—for the first time when Oliver was—gosh, he must have been eight months old, yes, nine months old. And it helped going back and having a cute baby. I think it was like—they're so baby oriented. They're a big Catholic family. So she's the middle of eight kids.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, my goodness.

MS. OPIE: And all of them had produced a total of about 29 grandchildren for her parents. So from

two came eight to 29. And now those grandchildren are having babies. So it's a huge family Christmas scene and a very interesting functional family that is big and loving, like out of the Waltons, that I had never experienced before.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And were you accepted?

MS. OPIE: Very much so. Very much so. They actually really love me. They're really good to me. They're really—all of them are really cool.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So really, it's almost a mythical thing that you take a photograph of what you want, and then it transpires.

MS. OPIE: Yes, I like to think that when you send things out into the universe of what you want, that hopefully it will come your way. I actually believe in putting the desires out there, and hopefully they will trickle down to you at some point. I'm a big believer in that. Like UCLA, I always wanted UCLA and I ended up with UCLA. And I like that kind of idea of being positive as a human being. That even though I had my hardness in life, that there's so much joy, and there's so much amazement in what I find in relationship to even my own practice as an artist, but that there's just—there is this place that is very intriguing to me that I can, I don't know, navigate within, and I find [it] keeps my brain alive.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, and now, we're 10 years hence. And after the *Surfers*, after the *Icehouses* and the portraits, I noticed you also—we didn't even talk about the fact that you'd photographed all these children.

MS. OPIE: I did. I made children portraits because I made *Self Portrait/Nursing*, which was the third important self-portrait in the trilogy. When Oliver was a year old, I made that portrait. I've always wanted to photograph children, and I never could do it early on because I was afraid of that Mapplethorpe effect. It's like, Oh, yes, now the queer leather dyke is photographing children.

I had weird things said to me by collectors, like collectors that I won't name by name, who had really collected me in depth. I offered to photograph their children. And they said, "Well, what are you going to do to them? Are you going to cut them and pierce them?" And I just couldn't believe that that actually came out of their mouths. I was like, "Really? Are you joking?" And they kind of weren't joking. And I was just like, "Okay, whoa." And so with me being a mom and anchoring *Self-Portrait/Nursing* with these portraits of children that, ironically, half of them are from my lesbian friends from the early *Portraits* series or *Domestic* series, and the other half is artists friends and then curators. So it's a culmination of these kids coming together in my life.

I love photographing kids, and, again, it was a conversation with what was happening in contemporary photography. I felt that I didn't really like how the portraits of children were going. They were either overly sexualized or just completely decorated. They weren't just being themselves. And I felt like so much was loaded on children in relationship to how they were being represented that was—it felt really kind of fucked up to me. So I needed to correct it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] Well, and then I noticed that, of course, the cities continued.

MS. OPIE: Yes, *Chicago*

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But a very significant series, I think, is [*Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer*]

(*Lake Michigan*).

MS. OPIE: Yes, the four seasons of Lake Michigan.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay, let's talk about that.

MS. OPIE: Yes, it followed—obviously, at this point now, I've found a formula that I liked—[laughs].
But—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But different because there are no surfers and no icehouses.

MS. OPIE: No, no, but it's the seasons. It's the seasons of Lake Michigan. And you can't photograph Chicago without acknowledging the lake. And I couldn't photograph the lake in black and white, like I photographed the various places of architecture of Chicago, either iconic or not. You go from the Mies van der Rohe apartment building on Lakeshore Drive to Lower Wacker. There's a huge thing about how we define a place, or how we define a city.

But I couldn't—so *Lake Michigan* had to be about the seasons and the way that the lake just radically changes, and the way that that time in itself is how you occupy that city. So using something as simplistic as the four seasons allowed me to really represent the lake, except for the lake never really completely froze for winter, which pissed me off because it was just—they waited a whole year. They held the show a whole year for me to try to get a frozen lake, and it never froze.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: So in the print, if you look way back in the distance, the horizon has ice on it, but no.

And at that point, a young senator was being elected from Chicago while I was doing this body of work.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: Which is Obama.

[Audio break.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: We're not that far off schedule. Let's move ahead to your retrospective with the Guggenheim.

MS. OPIE: Okay.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Which is—

MS. OPIE: —huge.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Which is huge. It's September 26, [2008].

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're happily with Julie. You're married?

MS. OPIE: Well—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Sort of.

MS. OPIE: We couldn't get married. The window of our possibility of marriage happened during the Guggenheim show.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh.

MS. OPIE: And I was so busy with the show that this itself was a marriage, that we actually didn't—and then by the time we could get married, they had voted against it in California. So we wear rings and we're domestic partners legally. We're not married legally. But we're legally domestic partners and we are basically married.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And your domestic life is settled. Now you're having the Guggenheim retrospective.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You go to it. You look at it. You see all this work we've been talking about. How did you feel about looking at all your work in retrospect, looking back at all you've done. How do you feel about your work?

MS. OPIE: Proud, actually. Really proud. I felt like—I had been able— A, it was before my 50th birthday that I get to have four floors at the Guggenheim Museum. Who gets that, as a young artist? Well, I still consider myself a young artist. Now I guess I'm totally mid-career, but—which Lari Pittman says is the hardest place to be for any artist. But working with Jennifer Blessing was a—I just kept saying a joke: It's a blessing to be working with Jennifer Blessing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: But she was an amazing curator, brilliant. Everybody—the care that you're given when you work with a museum like the Guggenheim is just—it's hard to set any bar higher. It's unbelievable. They delivered me models. They trusted me, as an artist, to really lay out that show. They trusted what I wanted to do, and then Jennifer would fly out; we'd have conversations.

I said, "Listen, I can't pick the *American Cities*. I know we'll put all the *Freeways* here, but I need you to actually make a selection of the *American Cities* because I need a different eye on that body of work."

But I was very clear with other things that I wanted to do, very clear how I wanted to arrange it. I was very clear that I did not want the rotunda—not at all. After walking the museum in the early stages and realizing how that's designed and how formal the lines are in my work—and also seeing Richard Prince's show at the Guggenheim—I felt like when you got to the other section, then his work was making a lot more sense than it was in the rotunda. I think the rotunda is really hard on photography. I think it's great for painting and sculpture, but I think it's really hard to hang photographs there.

So they were happy with that. I was happy with that. And yes, I got to install with Louise Bourgeois next to me and get to walk through her work. And I got to talk to amazing people and just was—it was a really powerful moment. So powerful that I also was emotionally very scared by it. On an emotional level, it was really hard. I was, unfortunately, reading blogs that I probably shouldn't have been reading. There were a lot of mean blogs about me in terms of how I didn't deserve this, how I copied people, just really horrendous—how I'm fat and ugly. How could such a fat girl end up getting

like this? Just really cruel things in the blogosphere that was freaking me out.

And then homophobia was ramping up a bit. So I got really—because the Christian Right and the Tea Party and just other stuff—and I got very scared about that. I got very scared about being that vulnerable with all these bodies of work and that at the opening somebody would steal Oliver because they felt like that I didn't deserve to be a mother, that somebody who has labeled themselves a pervert shouldn't be raising a child. So there was a lot of really complex psychological emotion that was also going on in relationship to all the joy of being able to accomplish this.

I was photographing, at the same time, the *High School Football* series. So I was also trying to erase *Pervert* from my Wikipedia page because I didn't want all the coaches in these small American towns to Google me and the first piece they see is *Pervert*, when I've made all this other work.

So it was really complicated, like I'm digging deep into Americana with *High School Football*. The show is titled *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*. It's a lot.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And why did you decide to do the American football teams as photographic series?

MS. OPIE: Because I feel that the high school football field is a side of American landscape. And I wanted to extend that from the *Surfers* and the *Icehouses*. And I wanted to try to—I got really into—what's it called—it's the genre of painting of American landscape—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You mean Luminist?

MS. OPIE: No.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It can't be that.

MS. OPIE: No, it's where the figure is in the landscape—there's a name for it, and I'm forgetting it because I've been talking for so long.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, and we're almost finished. But I wanted—because I thought that, interestingly enough, all this work at the Guggenheim, and then people were really kind of fixated on the photographic—the football pictures got a tremendous amount of attention, not all of it positive.

MS. OPIE: No.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Which I thought was an interesting kind of—almost like a backlash. Did you feel that way?

MS. OPIE: No, I'm kind of used to that anyway. It's okay. I like to whip people around a little bit. People want you to just be kind of known for being able to do this. I find that an audience has a very hard time switching with an artist. It'll be very interesting to see what happens when I'm going put up this show *Regen Projects* that you've been seeing all day here.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Quite happily.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.] I'm making another big gesture. I'm making another change on them. And I've been in very heavy-duty documentary land for a while now. We'll talk about it next summer when we start, but from *High School Football*, then Hanjin Shipping, then also all the street photographs from Tea Party demonstrations, *Immigration March*—there's all that work. I felt like after being

named "Catherine Opie, the American photographer," at the same time, I actually was taking on that identity within myself a certain way, from 1999 and *In and Around Home*. That was two bodies that were created—another big shift in my mind in relationship to how I wanted to make work. That was like kind of going back to my early roots of San Francisco Art Institute as a street photographer a bit, dangling in that place a bit.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, let's stop for now.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: We've done this all day. That's been a lot.

[End of track.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: This is Hunter Drohojowska-Philp interviewing Cathy Opie at the artist's studio in the West Adams District of Los Angeles, California, on August 27—thank you, Cathy—August 27 [2012], for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Card number four.

Well, just to start, we'll talk about the fact that, Cathy, you just came back from Key West, Florida.

MS. OPIE: From Key West, Florida, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you were photographing Diana Nyad, who was—

MS. OPIE: I was.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Tell me why you were doing that.

MS. OPIE: Well, Diana has been a dear friend since 1993. She came to us in our kitchen four years ago—three and a half years ago—and told Julie and I, as dear friends, that she was going to try to achieve her swim that she was never able to achieve, which was going from Cuba to Florida, which is 103 miles of a continuous open-water swim. She hadn't swum professionally in 30 years, and she was about ready to turn 60 and she wanted to just do something extreme. So the swim was called *The Xtreme Dream*. She tried three times. She did not meet her goal. But her goal, in my mind, is not actually reachable. She was able to swim for 51 hours and five minutes. And she was stung by box jellyfish nine times this time, and there was a storm overhead as well. So things, unfortunately, didn't go completely as planned, but she's still one of my heroes in life.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But what about what she's doing represents a heroic effort to you?

MS. OPIE: Commitment—just the extreme commitment and training that it takes to do something like this. That somebody literally who was—she turned 63 while we were in Key West together—that somebody who is 63 can literally physically swim 51 hours is pretty amazing.

I've been working out and changing my body and just—I've always been really interested in athletes. And I think that it's kind of mind-boggling, what she is capable of doing with her body. It proves to a lot of people that, with proper training and that kind of commitment and more—I think more, not the athleticism, but what it means to actually say that you want to do something and then to follow through with it, and then have all this ingenuity and creativity in relationship to actually figuring out this puzzle of what it would be to cross this amount of space from Cuba to Key West, Florida. I just find it fascinating.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, and she's not the only athlete you have photographed.

MS. OPIE: No, I photographed a few athletes, but she's the prime athlete that I photographed over the years.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that's because of your personal relationship with her as well.

MS. OPIE: Yes, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And does it have anything to do with your own youthful interest in swimming?

MS. OPIE: Well, yes, I was a swimmer. So, yes, definitely. And my mom's a swimmer. I grew up knowing about Diana Nyad. So then when Diana became a friend, I think the person who was most excited was my mom. My mom was just like, "Oh, my God, you're friends with Diana Nyad." So yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because your mom's very athletic.

MS. OPIE: My mom's an athlete, yes, very much so.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm sure as a competitive swimmer yourself, you can relate physically to what she must have to go through to complete these.

MS. OPIE: It's unbelievable. It's absolutely unbelievable. You think 50, 55 strokes per minute, in the middle of an ocean, where you're unassisted and you're dealing with currents and you're dealing with weather and you're dealing with all of these different elements, it is; it's mind-boggling in a certain way.

If you just swim laps in the pool, let alone what it is to go out in that kind of open water and have that kind of distance, it's amazing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Fantastic.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you took some pictures of her?

MS. OPIE: I did. I took photographs of her coming in to the shore because we did—her crew felt that after three years of not being able to walk onto shore, that knowing this was the last attempt from Cuba to Florida, that to park the boats offshore and have her swim into the amazing mass of media that was there greeting her. Oliver, my son, handed her the roses, and which he was very proud to do. We went together—my 10-year-old son and I went down together. And I was glad to be there.

The most tender moment between Diana and I was about three hours after—four hours after the swim. She was lying on the couch in a bathrobe, kind of falling in and out of sleep, as you can imagine—exhaustion from that many nights up just swimming. And Bonnie, her trainer, who's my other best friend, was just like, "Have you taken a shower yet, Diana?" And Diana was like, "No, I haven't taken a shower." And I said, "Do you want me to bathe you?" So we went upstairs and I tenderly got all the gook off of her and got all her hair untangled with conditioner and just like got her all wrapped up and ready for bed. And that was a really beautiful moment between the two of us.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And this was this tender side of you, this kind of compassionate side of you—

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —is something that I don't think most people would necessarily glean.

MS. OPIE: No, I don't think so. I think that so much is hinged around the earlier portraits, or the self-portraits, that people have an enormous amount of assumptions of my personality based on those self-portraits. I think that definitely there's—part of my personality that exists completely within those self-portraits. They're titled "self-portraits." But at the same time, they were performing identity in a way that I felt that was really politically important. And so they're not necessarily like my inner personality of who I am as a person, but I think that a lot of assumptions are based on me because of me being out as being into SM and being part of the queer movement and all of that, enormous amount of assumptions.

Have you ever read a review that didn't start off by quoting, "In the 1990s, these portraits were made"? So, so much of everything I've made throughout my life pivots around that first moment of visibility as an artist. I'm glad I had that visibility. It's amazing. But I'm not one-dimensional as an artist. I think that other conversations can be made, and I think that people don't work hard enough, in a certain way, to figure out those—the other kind of dialogues that can be made.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Do you ever regret having done that as your earliest work?

MS. OPIE: No, there's no regrets. I don't think that you can have regrets in life, to a certain extent. That's, I guess, why I love Diana so much—it's about living boldly. It's about just utterly being bold in the world as a woman. And so no, I don't regret it. I think that the Guggenheim show helped a lot in relationship to people all of a sudden wrapping their mind around me as an artist, seeing all those bodies of work together. But I think that often we think very one-dimensionally as human beings, and it's hard for us to get beyond that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, and also that work was at least 20 years old, right?

MS. OPIE: Yes, yes. No, I mean, '90, I started the *Portraits*. I ended them in '95. And so there's been a lot of work made.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So it's really you as a person—when you look at those portraits, is this like a young person who has—did you think of that work as your youthful work, let's put it that way, as opposed to what you've called—now—you said the most difficult place to be, the mid-career work.

MS. OPIE: The mid-career work. I don't think I do view it as youthful in a certain way. I was in my 30s; I already didn't feel that youthful. I think that it was kind of the more mature body of work that I made at that point. But I also had been working so hard on other things that I felt at that point, having done photography for so many years, even up to the time that I was 30 when I started that body of work, that I kind of knew what I was doing, in a certain way. That work actually felt very mature to me.

And when I look back on it, it's still mature. I think that I actually know more technically now. I have a little bit more handle on lighting that I didn't have back then. It was kind of my first time really using strobes and doing studio stuff after being outside for a long time, in terms of just observing the world from the outside. And now I like the lighting, and I think that I nailed the lighting for what I was

trying to do with it. But I certainly have a lot more expertise with it at this point.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, when we last spoke, we were really wrapping up—we were talking about the Guggenheim show, and we were really responding to that. You explained about how the work was presented and so forth. And we talked a little bit about the critical response. What, in the end, do you feel about the critical response to that show? Do you feel like it was accurate? Do you feel as though you were understood?

MS. OPIE: Yes, it was accurate. I was understood. And I moved people. And that's what you always want the work to do. It's like you want to have moments within a large installation. I think it's a very hard thing to do. I [have] walked through many mid-career retrospectives of artists, and it's like, how do you balance that out; what do you put in; how do you create moments? And so when I was thinking about that show, it was really about creating these different moments within the floors, that you got to be engulfed with different periods of work that created a larger history in relationship to my practice.

But there were some really incredible moments that I got to do installation-wise that just felt like I was creating something for people to be held with, what it is to be held in a room or in a space that you don't want to leave.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Give me an example of that.

MS. OPIE: Well, the *Icehouses* and the *Surfers* room. All 14 of them across from one another. The room was perfect proportions. There were even 14 light panels on the ceiling. So the whole thing was just this perfect symmetry that the work has in it. If I had been in the rotunda, there's no way that that would have related that way. So being in the annex was fantastic, because the rotunda was just too hard.

That room is still the room that everybody says to me, "Oh, if I could go back to any room, it would be the *Icehouses* and *Surfers* across from one another."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, and those works, in particular, seem to have a relationship to the work that you did—well, I should do it probably in sequence. I was interested in the project you did for Hanjin Shipping.

MS. OPIE: Yeah, well, *Hanjin* came after that, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I found those works to be extremely interesting, but they seem to be almost modeled on the experience of looking at the earlier—again, the sort of monochromatic seascape—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —with a very thin horizon line and the color patterns changing from sky to sea.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'd like you to just talk about how the Hanjin Shipping series came about and what you did.

MS. OPIE: Yes, no, the Hanjin Shipping series started with—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's 2000 and—what year is that?

MS. OPIE: What is it—today is 2012. It must have been 2010 I did the journey, yes. Yes, that would have been right, 2010, because the last time I was in New Zealand working. So yes, Kathy Halbreich nominated me for this award by Hanjin. It was just this bizarre phone call I got out of the blue, where it was like, “Hi, you’ve been awarded this award by Hanjin Shipping, which is a \$50,000 award, but you’re required to make a body of work that we would get the first edition of. And you can choose to go from the port of Long Beach to Busan, Korea, or go from Busan, Korea, to the port of Long Beach on a container ship.” And I thought, “Oh, a container ship. Well, sure; well, okay, why not?” I’ve always been curious about container ships.

And so I said yes to it, and I asked if I could bring an assistant, which I did; his name is Dong Jun. He was one of my students from—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How do you spell that?

MS. OPIE: D-O-N-G and then last name J-U-N.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay.

MS. OPIE: And he was one of my students from UCLA who I just liked and he spoke Korean fluently, and I thought, Well, I don’t know how to speak Korean. I’d better ask somebody who can. First, there was absolutely not one Korean on the ship. The chief engineer and captain were German, and the crew was Filipino. Poor Dong was seasick the entire time.

But they said, “What do you propose that you’ll [do] for the body of work?” and I said, “Well, I’ve been making this work on water in which the horizon line is dead in the center. And I’m really interested in this as the quality of that line and what it does, and also on an aesthetic level formally, it’s where we always go to. We want that kind of horizon line.” And I said, “But I want to work on something that I think would be really interesting, which would be doing every sunrise and sunset of my trip, so that it sets this parameter of the trip.” Because it’s odd. Days go by in a way that you really—when you’re out at sea like that, you only can gauge the day from the sunrise to sunset. It’s a very odd experience to be out in the sea like that.

And also it’s the biggest cliché photographically, the sunrise and sunset, so again, to try to—like how I was talking earlier, when we last spoke about how to play with that—the notion of what is iconic, and kind of tweak it and twist it a bit to actually pick the utter cliché. But the parameters of it conceptually are that, in the body of work, there aren’t a sunrise and sunset every day, because the weather. There’s fog. There’s storms. There’s all of these things. So I created this kind of conceptual parameter in a certain way, but then your expectation of sunrise and sunset gets completely, utterly flipped from cliché because you don’t get to actually have the cliché moment on an everyday basis. It just appears there here and there.

Now, whether the weather would have been where I’d gotten a perfect sunrise and sunset every morning and every night, I think that that actually would have been a bummer for the body of work. I think that it is better that all of a sudden you shift into foggy coolness or storminess, that it carries you through much more on your own expectations of what it is to be out at sea.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And the element of time in this, because it’s 12 days?

MS. OPIE: It’s 10 days—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Ten days.

MS. OPIE: —but we repeat a day because of the International Date [Line] thing. So it's weird. There's two Thursdays in that. So it's—yes. But it's 10 days. So there it's 10 sunrises and 10 sunsets.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you think about the nature of passing time when you were making the work and how—

MS. OPIE: Very much so. It became a really amazing thing, the passage of time. And I think that the title is really important to the body of work, which is *Twelve Miles to the Horizon*. Because I was sitting on the deck with the first mate and I'm just looking out at that horizon line. And I said, "So how far are we from the horizon line"—and he goes, "How far do you think?" And I was, "I don't know, 100 miles. Am I seeing out 100 miles?" He goes, "You're only 12 miles from the horizon." And to me, that became this perfect kind of moment where I figured out the name of the body of work, because you never get to the horizon line. You're 12 miles—12 miles to the horizon, but you're in constant motion, so it's not anything you can obtain, right? It's as ethereal as the sunrise and sunset—you're as displaced in a certain way.

So it's kind of crazy, but you go by meals. I would spend—I'd get up at four o'clock. I'd get to the deck. I'd watch it go from dark to the sun rising, and that would be about three hours. And then I would eat breakfast and then go back to my room and take a nap or play Scrabble. I did a lot of Scrabble playing. And then I would wander the ship for the rest of the day just making other photographs. I have thousands and thousands of photographs of just documentary of the ship. And then I would eat dinner and go on deck and watch the sunset, which would take about two and a half hours.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Just out of curiosity, is it all—when anybody goes on a ship anywhere, is it always 12 miles to the horizon line? Is that the—

MS. OPIE: It depends on the height of the ship.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —the limit of the human eye?

MS. OPIE: No, it's not the human eye. It's a mathematical equation in relationship to the height of the ship to the horizon line. So he just did the math for me in terms of the height of the ship and where we were to the horizon. So on that particular ship, on a container ship holding 5,800 containers, it was 12 miles.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's fascinating. Now, when you finished the trip to Busan, you've got off the ship in Busan.

MS. OPIE: Actually, I chose from Korea to Long Beach because I wanted to get off this ship and be home.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Okay. So tell me about this. You flew to Korea—

MS. OPIE: So I flew to Korea. I did a lecture.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: Did a big lecture. It was really amazing. I had a really great translator who translated it. It

wasn't Dong; they had already arranged another translator, and Dong said that she did a pretty good job. It was very interesting because there were a lot of young lesbians in the audience who were just blown away, kind of did that weird rock-star thing to me, where they were standing around me and breaking out crying at meeting me, and having me sign autographs and things like that. You don't really expect to have that kind of effect in terms of being out. But then when you travel around the world, you realize how much your own presence and your own boldness has really affected a whole younger generation.

And that was really interesting. These girls were like 14, 15 years old.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And where was the lecture?

MS. OPIE: It was—I cannot tell you where it was. I'd have to look at my résumé.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Was it in Seoul?

MS. OPIE: Yes, it was in Seoul.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And then you got on this container ship with what?

MS. OPIE: We flew out. With all my gear and a bag of clothes, but I wore a uniform. I wanted to wear a uniform. It was so funny because I would call them and I'd ask them questions. I'd be like, "Well, what do you wear on this ship? Do I need heavy work boots? What kind of clothing do I need?" I knew I was going to be passing up through the Aleutians around Alaska to come back down to California. So I knew that I would need a heavy winter jacket to be out. Wind gear, gloves, things like that, hat.

But I was like, Well, what am I going to wear? And so my assistant and I ordered coveralls for—because they said the ship was very dirty. And I was like, Well, I don't want grease all over my jeans or things like that. So I wear coveralls and I have a uniform. And so it became more like a performance piece for me, too, because I had my uniform that I put on every day with my hat that said "Hanjin Shipping" and then "Artist" on the blue hat. And the coveralls had my name, "Cathy," and the "Hanjin Shipping Artist." So it was like I was on the ship. I had a duty. I was an artist. I had a uniform. Dong had a uniform. We were the Hanjin Shipping artists.

So that made it feel comfortable—that I had this uniform to put on every day.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I hope there were photographs of you.

MS. OPIE: There is; actually, Long Beach Museum is going to do a show of Hanjin work that's going to open—which is perfect because the harbor of the Long Beach Port is going to be on one wall, and then you're going to look out at the actual harbor where Hanjin is. So it's kind of fantastic.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because they have that big glass window.

MS. OPIE: They have that big glass window. So across from that we'll put—so they're doing the whole entire show, *Twelve Miles to the Horizon*. I've never shown my ship log drawings or writing. I did a little ship log. And those were never in the exhibition before. So they'll be at Long Beach for the first time, with an image of Dong and I in our uniforms.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you had fun with it. It wasn't just your serious—it's a very serious

body of work, but I can tell you had some fun with it as well.

MS. OPIE: I think—that's an interesting question, Hunter, because my work is very serious, but I have an incredible sense of humor.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's true.

MS. OPIE: I think that people don't actually understand that. Because I was talking to somebody recently about that, and I realized that, when I'm giving a lecture, there's a few moments, like in one body of work, in 1999, there's this poorly attended Civil War reenactment with one person watching it. And it just looks really sad. But when I lecture—people are constantly laughing when I'm giving a lecture, but my work is not funny, in a certain way. My work has this other kind of seriousness to it. That's very curious. I've never really understood how to be as playful with my work as I am in life, I think. It's a little schism for me that I haven't figured out. Every once in a while, there's that kind of ironic funny photograph. It comes up more in 1999, in *In and Around Home* and those bodies of work, and then the other bodies of work.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It's funny. I was going to say the one place where I can immediately think of that is in that 1999 body of work and you talk about the influence of William Eggleston.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when I was looking at that work and the color in that work, I could see that fairly clearly, although obviously it's a whole different way of approaching it. And I'd like you to talk about that body of work and also about Eggleston, who I don't think of as being necessarily a logical predecessor for you, but of course—

MS. OPIE: No, no, that's the thing; I think that there's different people that you have conversations with. Eggleston has always been—he is the first master of color photography. And I'm really a colorist. When I'm making work, it's really about color. If I'm making black-and-white work, then it's really about that. I choose both very fluidly; it's depending on what bodies of work I want to make. But Eggleston was important, I think, in a certain way, as also in that same way of New Topographics, of taking images that were a new way of looking at the world. That was about the banality.

There were certain moments with Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange when those happened, definitely, but that was still about information, to a certain extent, that is different than banality or of a moment of being able to just be aware that all of a sudden this weird stack of things holds some kind of meaning. That he's able to do.

So I really like—I like Eggleston for that. I like the fact that he pretty much gave permission to a generation to just take photographs of whatever is before them. But with him, there's always the ability to really realize light and color and all of that, which is key for the work.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you're talking about humor, of course, there's tons of humor in Eggleston.

MS. OPIE: His work is very funny.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes. I would say.

MS. OPIE: And his work is very "Fuck you," too. Where my work isn't as "Fuck you." I think of certain

of his gestures and how he is a little bit, as a photographer—it's serious, but there's also—there is a ribbing in there. His portraits aren't kind portraits, but they're also not mean portraits. They exist in this really interesting in-between way. And the observations are incredible. I always think of that man standing with his hand in his pocket with a white jacket on and with the African-American driver just directly behind him, just in terms of the South and race and representation of dilapidated buildings, which Evans did as well, but Eggleston has just done it in a very different way.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, the buildings are dilapidated in a different way as well. I think, moving on to this conversation, you gave me a book that I thought was very interesting. It's called *Between Artists*. And it's a conversation between you and Andrea Bowers.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And I did think that that interview, that mutual Q&A that you two did, had a lot of interesting information in it about the nature of the landscape and how it had changed, especially in Ohio, where you're from, and in California, and the political reasons for that. And of course, the landscape in America changes exactly that way from Walker Evans's period to William Eggleston's period.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The dilapidation isn't so much a scenic dilapidation as a kind of tragic dilapidation, by the time you get to Eggleston. Would you agree with that?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I would completely agree with that. It's interesting because it's also—it's a set of circumstances, too, that is not just based on the way that we look at government in terms of that role of the FSA photographers and what they were trying to set forth in relationship to creating an archive that informed ideas of poverty. Eggleston's is just the everyday. That's a huge difference in terms of ideas of representation, too, where you're going out with a social message.

I don't think Eggleston actually has any social messages whatsoever in his work. I think that you can make social messages out of his work, but I don't think Bill goes out there thinking, I'm going to make this body of work that's going to inform this. One of the best things is that conversation I had with Eggleston, which is a direct conversation of the body of work in which I did *Inauguration*. And then, he did *Election Eve*. And *Election Eve* was literally the banality around Plains, Georgia, of what he saw.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And that was 1976.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And your project was the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2008.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm glad you brought that up because that was going to be my question. So let's just carry on.

MS. OPIE: Well, that's so directly—yes, it's so directly linked to Eggleston, where it was the first time that I was making a body of work in complete relationship to it. *Election Eve* is just, to me, one of the more amazing pieces, that very few people ever get to see. The books were made. They were two-volume books, 50 photographs in each book. And it's almost impossible. I forgot how many

editions were made, but not very many, maybe three or four.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And they're not exhibited as independent entities.

MS. OPIE: No, you don't get to see the images in the book. But the idea of 100 photographs, 100 photographs representing this time period—but his were literally of the abandoned South, just as what he makes images of, and right around the time that Carter was getting elected. And mine are literally of the Mall being packed and that moment of an inauguration, which is the first African-American president being elected.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes, but yours—

MS. OPIE: So mine is packed.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yours is a victory and his was a defeat—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Essentially. He's photographing Carter's defeat, and you're photographing the very unlikely election of Barack Obama.

MS. OPIE: But that wasn't the second election of Carter that he was photographing. It was right before the first election of Carter.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm sorry. You're absolutely correct. I stand corrected. You're absolutely correct in that.

MS. OPIE: So it was about—yes, it was about this victory—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Thank you, correct the record there. It is about—I'm so sorry.

MS. OPIE: Yes, it is about the victory of Carter, but it's not what we think of as how political images should be looked at. It's about the banality of the landscape. It's about the everyday. And I wanted to switch it to where it brings back to what we look at. At this point we're so media saturated that we forget the little nuances like the wind whipping across the Mall at the end of the day, all the garbage that's left, the discarded American flags. So mine is this bizarre set of questions in relationships to almost representation of something like the inauguration. Where we could turn on our TVs and all of us will follow it. We see those little American flags just waving and kind of how the media sets it up. But we don't see the right-after.

When you get to my parade photographs, they're actually not the parade; they're everybody in formation before they're going down Pennsylvania Ave. So they're just rehearsing the parade.

I'm trying to set up a different set of questions in a certain way, not only as celebration, but it also it's just like, wow, for one moment, we can all gather together that mass and have this incredible moment of joy and accomplishment. And literally, the next moment we are leaving all of our trash on the National Mall. That to me, that's the problem that becomes the kind of oppositional politics and everything. It's like, how do you take photographs and begin to represent those issues and those problems in a certain way?

Because we all know that photography at this point is just—we are so inundated with it. There's not too many new things that we can form as hypothesis in relationship to the medium. Our

expectations are pretty clear. We can have conversations with the history of photography, and that's what most of us do at this point, as well as painting, for myself. But it's almost impossible to try to make a document, or create a document, that can stand solely on its own.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, especially something like the inauguration of a president, which is, of course, an ultra-saturated topic—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —visually. You're up against every single photographer from around the world from every news agency standing there making their pictures.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you chose to really take a different approach. And it's a very unheroic—that's not correct—it's not the right word. But clearly you're focusing on everything that the mainstream media is not focusing on, I would say.

MS. OPIE: Right. Yes, and within that there's those moments where all of a sudden, everybody else is on Pennsylvania Avenue actually watching the parade, where the president and Michelle grab hands as they're walking down Pennsylvania Avenue. What am I photographing? The big—what are they called, like, teleprompters? No—are they called—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Screens—the projection screens.

MS. OPIE: Yes, the big screens of them. So I like that. And then you have this woman wrapped in a survival blanket. You have National Guards. Then you have trash and—somebody hauled a pallet in to sit on. All of that to me is so much more interesting to try to make an image of than being that news photographer that actually is capturing that moment. So it's about, Okay, how do I explain this? With documentary at this point, it's about those degrees of separation in terms of media versus—is media like documentary at this point? How do we actually view the way that we slice those things apart?

I think it's really complicated. I'm having a really hard time wrapping my head around it and trying to articulate it to you. But it is about finding the otherness in relationship to something that is so solidified for us as a public and as an audience.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, it was interesting about—again, going back to the interview with Andrea Bowers, whose work is explicitly political—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —explicitly feminist, explicitly about workers and so forth. And I think in that interview, it becomes clear that your work is less explicit. You don't really talk about it specifically that way, but I got the impression from that interview that despite your quite specific political beliefs, I don't see that being as explicitly spelled out in your work. I'd like you to talk about pulling back from that, despite your very specific—I know you're a political person, but you don't make explicitly political work.

MS. OPIE: No, I don't, because I think that—I'm not interested in a universality, really. I think that myself—my own political beliefs come up in the work from time to time. But I do believe in finding that other space that we all can enter in together despite our own internal beliefs. Like with the

photographs in the early '90s—we'll go back to that—how do I end up making really, really pointed work about my community in which, at that point, there wasn't any of those examples on an aesthetic level to enter?

I do believe those portraits created a platform for all of a sudden people to be like, Wow, but why am I holding up all of these opinions in relationship to my own ideas about same-sex relationships? And you had to enter it instead from this really formal place of beauty.

So a lot of my navigation is not slamming my own politics down somebody's throat, but it's actually using aesthetics in relationship to creating representations that we can all possibly enter it in different ways. Not trying to create a universal language, but I think that there's something really different between universality and equality. And I think I'm more interested in ideas of equality. That I want to be treated the same, in a certain way. And so therefore, as an artist, I still want to have that equality happen within the work somehow.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I wanted to take that even further, because one thing that struck me—and it may not be still be true—but in that same interview, you said that you've always made a point of reading the *LA Times*—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —because you like the local news.

MS. OPIE: Yes, I like the local news, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Would you talk about that a little bit? I mean, since LA is full of people reading the *New York Times*. [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: Yes. I have to say now that I read two papers. I read the *New York Times* online just because I'm interested, but I like the *LA Times* because I find out about all these different things that are happening in terms of the community.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: There's also been a lot of writing about your work in community, and let's talk about that. You're interested in local news. You're interested in community. I'd like you to talk about what that, quote, community issue is for you.

MS. OPIE: Well, I think that community, again, is like something that we all are seeking. I think that we seek it in this very interesting way. And I think that we are literally—as a species, we're also pack animals to a certain extent. We like a pack. We like to have people around us. We want to have people around us that are thinking the same way, that have opinions.

Humans want to share information. They want to share ideas. They want to inspire. They want to invent. We're a very, very social species, for the most part. Some people aren't. Some people are very introverted, but the extraverts are reaching out constantly looking, thinking. Look at Apple computer, in a certain way, how they figured out how to engage a public. They engaged a public through these incredible devices that they invented that changed our way of living.

And art is a little bit the same way—as well as creating dialogue. So really, my ideas around community is the idea of creating dialogue. That it's not only about friends and having a place that you can land, but on a larger level, it's about communicating to a certain extent. And communicating becomes part of community that you are able to reach out and reach over those lines and create discourses.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Is that why you think you go back over and over again to documentary photography?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I think so. Documentary, to me, is the place that we hold history. And I think that from a place where I was taught and where I went through school and so forth, that any—even from my childhood, my dad, in terms of his political campaign collection and things like that—that history has always been kind of the driving force in relationship to my own communication within work. And that documentary is the easiest place to begin to create those dialogues, by forming it around that.

A lot of people would argue that I'm not a documentary photographer.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm using your words.

MS. OPIE: Yes, I know.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I'm using your expression.

MS. OPIE: But some critics would say that I'm not, that—I've been called more of a conceptual artist than a documentary photographer. But I actually think that I'm playing with that language. And it's important for me to root the work in that kind of specificity.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What part of you as a photographer chooses the moment of documentation, or being documentary, of an event or a community or people versus the part of you that is looking to work with the effect of light and space in your landscape, or really more seascape, photographs?

MS. OPIE: Yes. Seascapes, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: They're really not landscapes. They're really seascapes.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So which part of—do you easily maneuver back and forth, or do you think about it, or is it just like, I'm bored with people; I'm going to go out—I'm going to go photograph some—

MS. OPIE: I think it's about—yes, I think it's a contemplation. I think that I'm really interested in being alone as well. That sometimes the public is too much and being in the midst of people. Inauguration was exhausting; that amount of equipment, that amount of people was like, the last—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Just to pause there. Just like how many days were you there and how much equipment –

MS. OPIE: Three. Three days.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Three days. How many people did you take?

MS. OPIE: Nobody.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You didn't take an assistant.

MS. OPIE: No.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, wow.

MS. OPIE: No. Andrea Bowers and I shared an apartment together, but she was doing her own work and I was doing my own work. I had called her, and I said, "Listen, I rented an apartment in DC for the inauguration. I'm going. I know you make political work, too. It's a two-bedroom apartment. You're more than welcome to come hang." And so she did. So—but no, no assistants. Couldn't travel with an assistant. An assistant wouldn't be able to flank me in the same way. I had to move. I had to move really quick and really free. And I had to make decisions at a moment, and I didn't want to have to worry about anybody else or telling anybody else what to do, because I had to be solely alone and in my head in relationship to what I was seeing.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Are you doing like the "decisive moment" photography?

MS. OPIE: Yes, very much so. Yes. Yes, it's street photography. It's going back to my street roots.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And what camera were you taking to do that kind of—

MS. OPIE: This was a Canon. This was a really high-end Canon. But it was heavy. And I had a long lens as well.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What model was it, just for the record, if you know?

MS. OPIE: DS—I have to look it up. I should know my Canon models. It's not—like DS. It's the highest-end Canon you can get. It's not the D5, which everybody uses. It's a 26-megapixel camera.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And it's a heavy camera?

MS. OPIE: It's heavy. It's heavy. It wears on you. My arm was shot for about three weeks afterwards just from hefting it up and just carrying it. I was losing—going numb; it was very cold. I was so cold. And everything strapped to me. And I had hand warmers that I would pop every once in a while to put my gloves in between things. But it was grueling physically because I walked everywhere in DC, too, because I just wanted to be on the street, focusing, really in it. And so, yes. So I did the day before the inauguration, and then the day after just photographing everything on the Mall, like just the ending image in the book of the Obama ice sculpture.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Which is one of my favorites. The melting ice sculpture of Barack Obama. [They laugh.]

MS. OPIE: Of MSNBC, exactly.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: Where Rachel Maddow's booth was.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Did you get press credentials?

MS. OPIE: No, I did not. I did not.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you go as a member of the public?

MS. OPIE: I did.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did you get back behind things?

MS. OPIE: Well, the Mall is just open, so you can just do it. And then I was actually, at one point, supposed to be on a rooftop because the—really amazing, the Hirshhorn, Kerry Broucher really helped hook me up with access to things. That's how I got into the one gala of—the Georgia State Ball; he got me into that. And also the jazz performance at [the] Lincoln [Memorial], which is the beautiful like blue and red lights in the images, and there's this one silhouette of a woman on the curtain that's in the book. That was from that performance.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But you went as a member of the public.

MS. OPIE: I went in as a member of the public.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And you wanted that?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I did. I didn't want to have that access of all the other news photographers. If he gets elected again, I wouldn't mind that. Call me back.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.]

MS. OPIE: I may actually be up and close and be part of the news corps. No, I wanted it to be like, "We the people," of the people, with the people.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how did this transpire for you? How did you decide to do it, or did the book precede your decision to do it?

MS. OPIE: No, I decided to do it. I wanted to make a book. And I wanted it to be in conversation with Eggleston's *Election Eve*.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So it all came from you. It was all your idea.

MS. OPIE: Yes. Yes. And then, fortunately, it was published.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: There are lots of books of your work. You have published more books than I have.

MS. OPIE: Here and there. Catalogues, a lot of catalogues. No real books. Most of them have been museum catalogues.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Picture books, which is great.

Now, let's go on to what we're talking about. We got off track a little bit because we're talking about that kind of immersive work with people versus the contemplative, go away and do the seascapes.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how do you know, as a photographer, when it's time to shut down one and go to the other? How do you balance them?

MS. OPIE: Well, it depends on what's happening in your life at different times. When I did the Lake Erie photographs last year, [it] was because I was commissioned from the Cleveland Clinic to make a body of work. So that body of work is titled *Somewhere in the Middle*. So the line, again, is in the middle.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, let's talk about that body of work, because that's I think the

most recent work—

MS. OPIE: Yes, besides the photographs downstairs, yes, that I'm working on for my next show.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So tell me about the Cleveland Clinic project.

MS. OPIE: Well, the Cleveland Clinic. At times, now, I'm getting commissions like Hanjin did. The Cleveland Clinic really does amazing commissions with artists. If you go to the Cleveland Clinic, it's like going to a museum. They have more contemporary art on all the floors of artists all over—Joanne Cohen, it's her mastermind. She's had a number of artists coming in and actually do site-specific pieces. I worked with the architect, looked at the hallway, and designed this piece in which it's the four seasons of Lake Erie. So you have four summer photographs. Four fall, five winter, four of the spring, and then four of the summer, as you go down this long hospital corridor.

It has a cornfield, a strip of a cornfield that becomes like on a column that you hit before it—it was my first piece that I ever did which was a permanent installation that was site specific. I said yes partly because I grew up in Ohio, but I thought, What a great experience to go back to Lake Erie and have this moment with this place that I left when I was 13, but that is so embedded within me as a person.

And it was great. It was like I came home, actually feeling very fulfilled by relooking at that landscape. I think that photography does this really great thing, that you always hold images in your mind's eye in relationship to where you've been and the events you've been in. But then to actually go back and kind of re-photograph your hometown, it felt right. It felt very healing in a certain way, like I got to reclaim it. It was a reclamation that happened after leaving at 13, and under duress when I left, and so I got to, at 50 years old, reclaim it.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, in one interview, you talk about being able to go across the street from your house to a cornfield—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —and just lie down in the cornfield and look at the sky.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And did going there trigger that again, that memory for you?

MS. OPIE: Yes. That's why I started out with a cornfield, a strip of a cornfield, in the installation, because wherever I lived, there was always a cornfield across the street.

But being alone and on the ice, just that contemplation that happens: you're out there; you're fully dressed in all this winter gear; and it takes hours to watch the light change. I'm not just going out and picking up the camera and snapping. I'm standing for hours and just waiting and watching. The landscapes are very internal, where the other—the work of people is very external because you have to be external with people. But the landscapes become this very quiet place for me that I really enjoy.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: When you were sitting there watching, as you describe it, do you photograph persistently, or do you just take a picture when you think the moment is right?

MS. OPIE: I photograph when I feel the moment is right. So I'll just stand there. I'll watch the light

subtly shift. I'll kind of just look around a lot, and then you can just—if you look at my contact sheets, you see different moments where I'll wait an hour for the light to shift so that I get a deeper color out of it, because I'm not manipulating it in the computer at all. Even though I'm photographing digitally, the color that's there is exactly the way that film would describe it, too. I'm not saturating things. I'm not upping things. I treat digital very much like I shot with film.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Do you feel that treating it with a post-facto treatment that way in a computer—do you think that would be sort of cheating?

MS. OPIE: For me, it would be, yes. For other people, no, but that's their choice in terms of how they want things to look. For me, I like the waiting. I think that there is something really important in waiting. I think that photography is an immediate thing. And I think, in terms of the waiting, it's almost—in a weird way, I feel a little bit more like I'm having a moment in the studio with a canvas versus just the immediacy of like, Oh, yes, that looks good, click, and off you go. But you get to think. You get to watch. You get to hear the wind whistle past you. All of a sudden, flocks of birds. So the interesting thing is that photographs are utterly silent to any of the viewers who are ending up—but there is no silence when you're out there.

It's just like in the morning, you're waiting for flocks of birds to leave, and you're just like, Oh, they're ruining my shot. I don't digitally take them out. So there's just a lot of waiting. And I find it very much a place of meditation for me. Because I can't just sit and be idle and meditate. I've tried. I'm not very good at yoga or meditation. I'm too fast. But that slows me down.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And when you're out there waiting, what are you actually doing?

MS. OPIE: Just watching and being in the moment.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Are you sitting? Are you standing?

MS. OPIE: Sometimes I sit down. But mostly, I'm just standing. So even on the ship, I would just be standing there, waiting for three hours, just standing on deck or moving back and forth. And on the ship, it was interesting because obviously, the ship is moving constantly to the horizon line. The ship goes to the left, comes back up. I see in the grid of camera that it's straight: I click. I go back over the right. So there's—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's very funny.

MS. OPIE: Yes, because I shoot on tripod for the most part with these. They have to be on a tripod. The preciseness is really important. Because I'm not straightening things out afterwards. They have to kind of come straight.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So even on the ship, you had a tripod. Was it attached to anything?

MS. OPIE: No, just on deck.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Attached to you in your hand.

MS. OPIE: Well, yes, I wouldn't let go of it. Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Just to ask—the commission. You got \$50,000 from Hanjin. How much did the Cleveland Clinic pay for their commission?

MS. OPIE: A hundred twenty-five thousand dollars.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's a nice one. And then is that unique to them, or are there any other prints, or is that—

MS. OPIE: No, I printed an edition of five. They got the first edition. It was 22 photographs they got. So still, when you think about it, these corporate commissions are a great deal for them. Hanjin got 22 photographs, as well, for \$50,000.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. OPIE: So it's pretty, pretty good. But I got to have the experience. So they pay for you; like also the Cleveland Clinic, the \$125,000 was the flat rate. All my plane flights, everything that was—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Included.

MS. OPIE: —that was extra.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That it was included. Okay.

MS. OPIE: Yes, so it was—with Hanjin, all the flights and all of that was paid for on top of the \$50,000.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And there wasn't any sort of editorial review of the work from them.

MS. OPIE: No, no—neither—editorial reviews. No. I get to be solely the one who decides how it goes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did I ask you whether you do commissioned portraits?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I do do commissioned portraits.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did I ask that before?

MS. OPIE: No, you haven't.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Who have you done as a commissioned portrait?

MS. OPIE: I have photographed—oh, geez—I'm so bad with names. He's a LACMA trustee, Bohnett, David Bohnett.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Right, right, B-O-H-N-E-T-T, David Bohnett.

MS. OPIE: Yes. And then I have photographed the head of CAA, his daughter, Billie. I'm forgetting his name. But, here and there quite a few different commissioned portraits.

[Telephone rings.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What's the difference—what's the process of a commissioned—now, we talk about editorial control; how about a commissioned portrait? Do they have editorial say in that?

MS. OPIE: No, but sometimes they don't like what you do, and that's a drag. There was a family that—I won't say their name, but they got their portraits of their kids, and they were like, "Oh, wow, we

really don't like this. He looks really sickly." And I was like, "Well, this is how he looked that day you brought him to the studio." And then I suggested one portrait that I was really in love with that they didn't like, but they picked the more awkward portrait. But what I do is, I usually pick what I like. And sometimes they ask me to see more and then I show them more. But I really don't like that. I really want them to just take what I would have chosen, as I would have edited for a show.

But yes, I like commissions. Commissions are good. I like making portraits, so that's always nice. And I think all the editorial work that I've done for different magazines allows me to work faster on my feet in different circumstances. I've shot for the *New York Times Magazine* a ton. I like those situations because you have to land, and you have to figure out that person right away. You have to make a really strong portrait, and the *New York Times Magazine* is known for excellent photography. And so, yes, I like those moments where I'm trying to figure that out.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So you never feel as though, Oh, I'm an artist; I can't do commercial assignments.

MS. OPIE: No, I've done a lot of commercial assignments. I did a whole Knoll furniture catalogue, of all their new office furniture, back in like 1998. That required me traveling all around the country and making this kind of interesting book. And I like it, though, if I'm doing commercial work with the acknowledgment that I'm an artist. I don't want to be one of those photographers that's doing commercial work that has the client constantly looking over their shoulder telling you how they want it. I want them to come to me and for me to say, No, this is what I'm going to do for you guys.

So I like authorship basically. I like control. It's very important for me to have the control in any situation.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, that is the mark of an artist, really.

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: A body of work that I have to admit I have not seen, but it got very nice remarks in the press, is a series of photographs of Cliff May architecture that you did for the Santa Barbara Museum.

MS. OPIE: Oh, yes, yes, the Santa Barbara Museum—

[End of track.]

MS. OPIE: Exactly. And that was a commission as well.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I don't know if that became a book or not, but—

MS. OPIE: Yes. I have the book downstairs. Yes. It was great. I've always loved Cliff May.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, let's talk about that, because the next thing I was going to talk about is your interest in modern architecture.

MS. OPIE: Yes. I like architecture. Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So tell me what you did for the Cliff May houses. First of all, say what this was for, a Santa Barbara—

MS. OPIE: Santa Barbara Museum of Art with the University of Santa Barbara, UCSB. They have the entire Cliff May archive, so all of his plans, all the photographs. And Cliff May was a really important architect and also very commercially successful in basically the '40s and '50s and '60s in California. And what he did was he invented the California ranch house.

So he—from Neutra and others in terms of that outdoor living, but Cliff May figured out how to make the ranch house in this way, and it was more of a—some of them were completely customized, but like the Long Beach ranchos, those were more of a planned community almost.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So back to the master planned community of your—

MS. OPIE: Back to the master plan.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —of your first body of work.

MS. OPIE: But Cliff made the master plan like nobody else did master plan. His houses and his spaces are beautiful.

And so I photographed a couple of actors' houses.

[Side conversation.]

[Audio break.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Here we go. We're back. We're talking about—

MS. OPIE: Okay. —about Cliff May.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So what did that do? First of all, what did you like—well, you liked the architecture and—

MS. OPIE: Yes. And I photographed for years for *Nest* magazine. When *Nest* was out, I did an enormous amount of weird, kind of cool spaces. *Nest* magazine was a magazine that went for what—a quarterly magazine that went for maybe five years.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: Do you remember *Nest*?

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Of course, I do.

MS. OPIE: Yes. And so I was their contributing photographer and their official—I would say maybe three-quarters of the issues, I would shoot something for them.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: On assignment.

MS. OPIE: On assignment. I like architecture. I liked trying to figure that out. Houses are really hard to photograph. And *Nest* spaces are really interesting.

So I just thought that when they asked me about Cliff May, at first, I was like, Oh, I'm too busy. I just don't want to do that right now. I was kind of dreading it, really dragging my heels on it. I really wished that I hadn't said yes. And then I went to my first Cliff May house and was just like, Oh, this is going to be great. I hadn't done houses in a while, and I just was like, Oh, like we're going to have

fun with this. And so I made a very simple little body of work that basically was four different houses.

Originally, I had a grand plan. I thought, Wouldn't it be great to photograph every Cliff May house within a 60-mile radius of LA? But no. No, it wouldn't be great. It would drive me crazy.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, just let's talk about why you're interested in architectural photography. There's a tradition of that in Los Angeles. Julius Shulman, of course.

MS. OPIE: There is. Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And then, later, people like Tim Street-Porter.

MS. OPIE: Yes. Julius Shulman said that I was the worst photographer he's ever seen in his entire life.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I wouldn't doubt that he would say that.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.] He was on a panel at the Cinerama Dome.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Were you there?

MS. OPIE: Yes. I was there.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, no.

MS. OPIE: And Ben Stiller was sitting next to me and they had just done the book on Los Angeles, *Looking at Los Angeles*.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Yes.

MS. OPIE: And I had work in it. And he turns around and he goes, "You, Catherine Opie, you, you're the worst photographer of Los Angeles." He goes, "You make ugly photographs of LA."

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: He said that in front of everybody?

MS. OPIE: Yes. He sure did. I was just like, Oh, well.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But he said a similar thing to Tim Street-Porter, so—

MS. OPIE: He makes beautiful photographs.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I worked with Julius on a book and I can really tell you that from Julius's point of view, there is only one photographer.

MS. OPIE: Yes. I know.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Him. He is the only photographer—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —who should be allowed to work at all.

MS. OPIE: I know.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Ever. Anyway, he's long gone.

MS. OPIE: Unfortunately.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But did you think of that work when you were approaching the photographs of architecture that you've done over the years?

MS. OPIE: I think of the history of architectural photography, definitely. *Chicago* had to be thought of that way. There's different bodies of work.

The *Mini-Malls* were—I think that's what bugged Julius, too, is like, Why would you pick mini-malls to photograph? But, again, I bump up against things. And so some of them are made to be perfect, like you would imagine architectural photographs.

In *Chicago*, there's two that are my favorite to talk about and lecture. One is the iconic Mies van der Rohe building on Lakeshore Drive, which I photographed completely like classical modern architecture.

Then I photographed Lower Wacker, which is the lower roadways to get around the Loop in Chicago, in the exact same way. And to me, the importance placed on architecture in Chicago as kind of a specificity of identity is as much of looking at Lower Wacker as it is looking at the Mies van der Rohe. Why would do we put weight to certain things?

So a lot of times, with the photographing of architecture, it's about trying to rewrite a new way of beginning to assess it or to look at it. Like we all hate mini-malls, but what if I make them most incredible mini-mall photograph? We all hate freeways. Let me make the most symbolic freeway photographs that you could begin to see. I think that I go off of that history of architecture, but that at the same time I'm always trying to bring my own influences into the idea of how to look at things and see things.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, what, if anything, did you learn about Cliff May, or about photographing that kind of residential architecture, in the process of doing that one series?

MS. OPIE: I haven't really learned anything, to tell you the truth. At this point, you can kind of plop me down anywhere. There are a few things that I did that I just liked on an aesthetic level that I wouldn't have done years before, that I would have been way more formal. It's like the actor—come on, Cathy, use your brain. He plays in *Modern Family* and he was—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: You're going to lose me because—

MS. OPIE: —Bundy. He played that character Bundy.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, that guy. The [A] Bundy guy.

MS. OPIE: Yes, but—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I don't know his name.

MS. OPIE: Oh, God. Anyway.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: On *Married with Children*. Whoever—for the record, whoever played [A] Bundy in *Married with Children*, that guy [Ed O'Neill].

MS. OPIE: Yes. I'm going to remember his name in a moment. But anyway, when I was photographing his house, he had this beautiful Roy McMakin table; he was a Roy McMakin fan, of his furniture. And I laid down on it, and I looked up at the skylight covered with leaves, big sycamore leaves on it—and that's a photograph that I wouldn't have taken years ago.

Then there was another moment with it that I was trying to figure out this inside/outside thing, which I did—wouldn't have done if I was doing it for *Nest* magazine—where I was photographing the interiors through the outside of the windows that were reflecting the exterior. So it was about kind of merging that inside/outside. I was trying to think about what Cliff May was doing on an aesthetic level, in terms of his ideas about inside/outside, and just trying to inform that little bit by the compositions that I was making.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: So is that, then, the last body of work for you to complete before this interview?

MS. OPIE: Well, that and I guess starting to complete the Elizabeth Taylor work.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I don't know about the Elizabeth Taylor work. Would you like to tell me about that?

MS. OPIE: Yes. I started last October, so October of 2011, photographing her home and doing—and this is another conversation with Eggleston, how Eggleston photographed Graceland. I wanted to do a conversation of a portrait of Elizabeth Taylor through her home and her belongings.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did this come about?

MS. OPIE: We had the same accountant. And my accountant kept saying to me, "Do you want to do anything with Elizabeth Taylor?" And I kept saying, "Derrick, I don't do celebrity. I just don't do celebrity." And Erik would come back to me and say, "I keep asking you this, but is there anything you want to do with Elizabeth Taylor, because I could have that happen." And I said, "Well, I just did this whole conversation—making *Inauguration* with Eggleston." I said, "If I could have access to all of her rooms in her house and do a portrait of her in relationship to her belongings, then that's what I would like to do."

So I met with her number one assistant, Tim. And they pitched the idea to Elizabeth. And Elizabeth loved the idea. So I started photographing her home in October or November, probably November, because Christmas decorations were just put up. So it was November—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —2011.

MS. OPIE: Two thousand eleven. And then she passed away right in the middle of doing this. She would watch me through her curtains. I never met her, because I didn't really want to meet her because I knew that she wasn't feeling well, and it wouldn't mean anything for me to meet her. We were going to edit the body of work later on together, and I thought that would be when we would meet each other. But she went into the hospital in February and never came out. And then I was there to witness the complete dismantling of the house for Christie's to take it away for auction.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Did you photograph that?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I have it all photographed.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Was that very moving?

MS. OPIE: Yes, it was intense. It was very intense—my relationship that I developed with Tim, we became very, very close. I'm the only photographer that was ever allowed in her personal closets, in her jewelry closet, in her bedroom, in her makeup area.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Do you know Tim's last name?

MS. OPIE: Tim. I'll have to look it up. I do know his last name, but—I'm having bad name problems right now. Tim—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, you just got back from Florida.

MS. OPIE: Yes. Mendelson, Tim Mendelson.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now—

MS. OPIE: He's amazing. He started working with her when he was 23 years old and he's like 46 now. So his whole life—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Fantastic.

MS. OPIE: —his whole life was dedicated to Elizabeth Taylor.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Not a bad thing maybe.

MS. OPIE: No.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I get to look? Oh, boy, this is exciting. So when and where and how will these see the light of day?

MS. OPIE: This is edited now from this amount of photographs to 136 photographs, which will be a book. Then there will be a series of closet photographs that will be shown for the first time at Miami Basel in—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Can we just talk about how successful this work will be? Shaun must be so excited.

MS. OPIE: Yes. Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I wanted to ask you about—while I'm thinking about Shaun—you talked in the last interview about being picked up by Regen—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —Gallery and how wonderful that was for you as a young artist. What has your experience been working with Shaun Regen over the years?

MS. OPIE: Well, I think that it's a very intimate relationship. They've become family at this point. It's a very interesting thing where it's business, but it's also family. Shaun and I are the same age. We were both born in 1961. I think she's an unbelievably brilliant businesswoman.

I've gone through a lot of emotional, personal things with Shaun, which makes it even more intimate—the death of her husband, Stuart Regen, and then also three weeks after he passed away from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. So we had to go through that

together.

We're very tied to each other. It's a very intimate relationship. We fight; we have healthy fights. Like sometimes she worries that I'm all over the place. She says, "Whoa! What is your identity as an artist? Sometimes I just feel like you're like, woof, woof, woof. You need to land somewhere." And I'm like, "Actually, I don't; this is just who I am, Shaun. This is who I've always been." But she's good in that way. She's really honest with me. She's really honest when things are working and when things aren't working. And when she's honest about things not working, it's really a bummer. It's horrible.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Well, it's more about the way people—from a marketing standpoint—people want to be able to sell identifiable works of art?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I think so. Maybe.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Like, Cathy Opie is the one who does—

MS. OPIE: —this, this, and this.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —the seascapes. Okay, I can sell seascapes all day long, but then if you come up with a body of documentary photographs, what am I supposed to do with that?

MS. OPIE: See, she loved the documentary work. The show that was done last year in Boston, she felt was just one of the most successful shows I had done. The kind of conversation of Hanjin around what Helen Molesworth put together, *Empty and Full*, she just adored.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That show, *Empty and Full*, at the ICA in Boston—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —and Helen Molesworth selections.

MS. OPIE: Yes, this was originally—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —was quite disparate. There were the documentary pictures, and of course, there were the seascapes.

MS. OPIE: Yes. No, she put them together for the first time. I didn't curate that show. It was one of the first times that I was ever completely curated; she made those decisions to put those two bodies of work together. And it came off the heels of us working for a really, really long time, where she was one of three curators who put me up for the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What year was that?

MS. OPIE: That would have been the last Venice Biennale, where the couple had the pavilion that I can never say their names—Calzz—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Oh, yes, okay, we—I know.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I know. I know. But that would be 2011.

MS. OPIE: Yes, 2011.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Right. So she put you up for the—

MS. OPIE: Yes, so Paul Ha, herself, and Laura [Steward] from SITE Santa Fe. I'm forgetting Laura's last name—who was the director of SITE Santa Fe. They had nominated me for the American pavilion. We put in a proposal of these photographs that I've been making in terms of looking at the kind of history of American genre of landscape painting, with filling it all of a sudden with current-issue things. So the Tea Party, the Boys Scout Jamboree, the Womyn's Michigan Music Festival. And I was going to really try to design the pavilions with also water in relationship to it, because of Venice being surrounded by water. And I had spent—I guess it was four years ago, photographing Venice in relationship to Canaletto.

Yes, which showed only in Italy, at Claudio Guenzani's gallery.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I was going to—let's pause there for a moment and—so but in the end, you didn't get to show in the Venice Biennale.

MS. OPIE: No, I almost got it. I was told that it was really hard decision, that I was definitely one of the finalists. And in some ways, it was good, because I was coming off the heels of the Guggenheim, and I think that that kind of big publicness of having to do that as well—I would have been prepared for it and I would have been so excited to get it, but it was also okay. There wasn't a lot of heartache in that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Because you were already very busy with all those other things.

MS. OPIE: And I was tired. I was worn out on that kind of public level. It's very public doing these big shows. And Venice is a huge—enormous amount of interviews, enormous amount of just intensity around that.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Now, I never did get to see—I remember we had a long conversation about this, years ago when you were photographing in response to Canaletto. And I was so excited to see that work. I never saw it, and now I know why, because it never got shown?

MS. OPIE: No, it never was shown in the United States, just in Italy.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And are you happy with the work?

MS. OPIE: Oh, yes. It's a really beautiful body of work, yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: It would seem to be really like a perfect combination for you of the sea and architecture.

MS. OPIE: Yes, but it turned out that I couldn't do Canaletto. I tried very hard to do Canaletto. I love Canaletto, but it was absolutely impossible; so there's only kind of a nuance of a fractured Canaletto that happened within the body of work.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And why couldn't you do it?

MS. OPIE: It's a different time period, a different history. The light and everything is there, and the possibility of it is there, but it doesn't mean anything photographically. It's all about Canaletto's paintings. Where I can certainly reference painters in terms of portraiture and pull it off, but I couldn't pull that off.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: How did you know you couldn't pull it off as an artist? You'd have to show me. I want to know more, like what goes on inside of you. Were you in there? You're in Venice, Italy. You're taking pictures.

MS. OPIE: Yes, I'm taking pictures six hours a day, six hours a day for six weeks.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And how do you know?

MS. OPIE: You're looking at the work and you're realizing that you have something here, but it's something that is your own experience, and that Canaletto's experience was because—it's in the same way that I looked at the mini-malls in LA. It was my landscape. And there is something about living in your own landscape and representing it and knowing it in that way.

So the problem also is since Canaletto, Venice has become one of the most iconic, photographed cities in the world, in terms of its light. So getting up against that was really difficult as well. It was like, Oh, my God, double whammy. Here I'm trying to do Canaletto, and then it's just—Venice—it's just about tourism at this point, which it wasn't when Canaletto was living at that time, in terms of making those paintings. And I definitely got the feel of the place by living there for six weeks and photographing every day, but the ability to literally have a true conversation with that work, I couldn't figure out. I couldn't wrap my head around it. So it became my own personal experience with the place.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: [Laughs.] What did that do to your confidence? Because one thing I think emerges from our lengthy interview is that you always seem—at least in these interviews—to be supremely confident, surprisingly confident, actually.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —or maybe not surprising. To what do you attribute this confidence, and then what happens to you when something doesn't work out?

MS. OPIE: Well, you let it go, and you make something else of it when something doesn't work out. I think that you have to be confident in order to be an artist. I think that if you're—you know the work that's being done by artists that don't have their own self-confidence and such an intensity with their own vision; like they make fun of themselves often. The work becomes satirical. There's none of that with me because I just—

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: The irony? Do you think that ironic presence in contemporary art is an artist not really having confidence?

MS. OPIE: Or constantly just creating conceptual conversations in relationship to history is because that's where they feel that—they trust themselves in relationship to going off of history, but maybe not like going off of history and bouncing two bounces over to then making your own relationship to your own work within that.

I've been teaching for a long time, and the biggest things that I noticed with my students is their own ability of not trusting themselves, that they're second-guessing themselves all the time, or that they're reading some really dense theoretical articles, and they realize that what they're thinking is stupid. So they just go like, "Oh, like this is stupid. What I'm thinking is stupid." I'm like, "No, no, no, no. How would you do it if you wanted to make it? Don't think about making an illustration off of this kind of theory. What would it look like in terms of if you were just envisioning it on your own? That's what you have to make."

And so I think a lot of teaching is building up one's own confidence in terms of their ability to trust their voice and their own vision.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I couldn't agree with you more. One thing I've been astonished at is these kinds of extraordinarily convoluted and recondite remarks that very young artists have about their work. The idea of studying critical theory is so entrenched in teaching—

MS. OPIE: Yes.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: —that it's as though they can't even really speak about their work in any kind of straightforward manner. As though speaking in this very convoluted and difficult way, or complex way, they would somehow trick you into thinking this is really, really smart.

MS. OPIE: Or really, really smart.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Or they're really smart.

MS. OPIE: Yes, exactly.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: What do you think about that, because you're super articulate about your work, but you don't really ever—and I know that your sense of theory is strong—I assume it is.

MS. OPIE: Yes, it is.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: But how did you avoid that trap?

MS. OPIE: Because I don't think it's real. Because I think that I have a real problem with it in terms of it as a crutch. You're using it as a crutch in relationship to where the work should be the crutch. It should be in the work. If it's not in the work, then it's not there. If you literally have this whole entire explanation, and then you're just standing there and you're like, "Really, that's what this is about?" I'm sorry, it doesn't—it's not working, then, in my mind.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: And as a teacher, do you tell them that?

MS. OPIE: Yes, I do, but then other teachers who are more theoretically based disagree with me saying that. But, yes I say that, yes. I'm a bit of that old school—like, definitely it can be from the brain, definitely, but it also has to come from a place that's an internal place that you're bouncing up against. I'm most interested in art that does that.

I think when I [am] most moved in the art that really I can spend time with is the work that I feel kind of enters me almost like a ghost, that I carry it with me, that it becomes this second other kind of thing on me. That's the same with like good movies, good TV shows—all of that is something that becomes internalized, that becomes a part of my everyday. I'm really interested if an artist can do that. I find that that's what holds me the most. And that's what I try to do.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: That's a fantastic place for us to end your last interview. But I don't want to cut you off before you've finished everything you have to say.

MS. OPIE: [Laughs.] No. I feel that's fine.

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: Is there anything you feel you haven't covered in the course of talking about this?

MS. OPIE: Not really. I mean, I just make a lot of work. [Laughs.]

MS. DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP: I have to say, I think these photographs—I'm looking through a book of these photographs of Elizabeth Taylor's house, and here's the little dog, and some of them, including the ones of the little dog, are so sad. They're very sad. You captured a lot of really sad stuff here, which we'll see in Miami Basel.

Thank you, Catherine Opie, for your time.

MS. OPIE: You're welcome. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]