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From Typologies to Portraits:  
Catherine Opie's Photographic Manipulations of Physiognomic Imagery

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelor of Art, Wofford College, 2001  
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May, 2005

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ABSTRACT

FROM TYPOLOGIES TO PORTRAITS: CATHERINE OPIE'S  
PHOTOGRAPHIC MANIPULATIONS OF PHYSIOGNOMIC IMAGERY

By Jennifer Tobitha Bridges, Master of Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Major Director: Dr. Robert Hobbs, *Rhoda Thalheimer Chair*, Department of  
Art History

This thesis proposes that California contemporary photographer Catherine Opie's *Being and Having* series (1991) and her *Portrait* series (1993-1996) parody the constraining binary gender discourse and stereotypes that emanate from it. In her art Opie uses familiar codes and identity discourses associated with traditional portrait photography and typological photographs to promote a postmodern and fluid model of gender identity. Her manipulation of photographic technique and subject matter validates cultural stereotypes of gender at the same time that it destabilizes them. Opie also simultaneously highlights fallacies such as the presumed objectivity and evidential force that is associated with the discourse of portrait photography as a documentary field. By presenting her portraits of lesbians to broad-based audiences in such a blatant and

stylized manner, Opie comments on the limitations of society's continued reliance on gender normativity and physiognomic modes of identifying communities.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis proposes that California contemporary photographer Catherine Opie's *Being and Having* series (1991) and her *Portrait* series (1993-1996) parody the constraining binary gender discourse and stereotypes that emanate from it. In her art Opie uses familiar codes and identity discourses associated with traditional portrait photography and photographic typologies to promote a postmodern and fluid model of gender identity. Her manipulation of photographic technique and subject matter validates cultural stereotypes of gender at the same time that it destabilizes them. Opie also simultaneously highlights fallacies such as the presumed objectivity and evidential force that is associated with the discourse of portrait photography as a documentary field. By presenting her portraits of lesbians to broad-based audiences in such a blatant and stylized manner, Opie comments on the limitations of society's continued reliance on gender normativity and physiognomic modes of identifying communities.

Created in the early 1990s, Opie's *Being and Having*, is a series of photographic "headshots" of women bearing false facial hair and tattoos, identifying each subject as lesbian. Each individual is framed frontally and is back-dropped by a brilliant yellow screen. The photographs are titled with absurd alias names such as "Chicken," "Papa Bear," and "Chief." Opie's *Portrait* series was created during the mid 1990s. The group consists of a sequence of elegant, frontal color images of individuals who have used their

bodies as sites of sexual and aesthetic experimentation through their choice of dress, tattoos and body markings. Occasionally, the use of hormones to alter secondary sex characteristics is evident.

Critics and historians are beginning to assess the impact of the artistic explorations of identity and body that were popularized during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Identity politics that explore ethnic, gendered, sexual and national boundaries have been the subject of several museum exhibitions, including the 1995 Whitney Biennial in which Opie participated. Historians and critics have actively pursued topics centered on artists exploring the female body or African American identity; however, it is only recently that a broad discourse on homosexual identity (particularly a lesbian one) has emerged. Sexual politics, homosexual rights, and gender lifestyles are currently widely visible in popular culture and are reflective of specific challenges to civil law. A significant proponent of postmodern identity politics, Opie is consciously driven in her work by an academic knowledge of both photographic and social history that enable it to be seen as part of a larger discourse. A graduate of CalArts (1988) and a professor of photography at both Yale University (2000-2001) and University of California at Irvine (present), Opie produced work during the 1990s that was notably more serious and academic than the popular camp sensibility created by queer artists in the mid and late twentieth century. Her entire body of work has been structured in terms of such theoretical and social ideas as feminism, gender studies and queer theory.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Lebovici, "Destabilizing Gender," *Make*, no. 89 (September/ November 2000): 18.

Critics and historians have commonly interpreted Opie's series of portraits as a quest for a fluid, postmodern gender model. In an interview with Opie in 2001, Maura Reilly compared the artist's work to Judith Butler's theories regarding gender, including the idea of gender performativity.<sup>2</sup> Other critics, including curator and critic Russell Ferguson in his essay for the catalogue of Opie's exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery in London, 2000, have noted Opie's use of traditional portrait photography to achieve new goals.<sup>3</sup> Since thorough explorations of Opie's knowledge of the major social and semiotic discourses surrounding the "other" in such historic situations as nineteenth-century medical images have not yet been undertaken, this thesis will analyze her work in relation to (1) nineteenth-century medical terminology of queer and lesbian bodies; (2) nineteenth-century photographic typologies depicting the categorical "other" within the medical field; and, (3) twentieth-century queer theories.

The thesis will rely on such theoretical and historical writings as Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* and *History of Sexuality*, as well as Sander Gilman's *Inscribing the Other*, to establish a basis for exploring semiotic discourses and stereotyped codes of representing the categorical "other." These texts will be instrumental in denaturalizing dominant understandings of categorized identities. This thesis will also use primary sources, offering knowledge of nineteenth-century sexual identity, which have served as a foundation of fundamental stereotypes of the lesbian

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<sup>2</sup> Maura Reilly, "The Drive to Describe: an Interview with Catherine Opie," *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 88.

<sup>3</sup> Russell Ferguson, "'How I Think': An Interview with Catherine Opie," in *Catherine Opie: The Photographers' Gallery, London* (London: Photographers' Gallery, 2000), 45.

body still subscribed to today. These early texts were written by such authors as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. This study will then introduce theories by Judith Butler (“Performative Acts and Gender Construction: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”) to discuss recent gender theory in relation to Opie’s work. An important background to this study will be Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s theories discussed in their co-authored text, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which sets out to undermine unitary, linear models of realization and conception. Moreover, this thesis will look at Alan Sekula’s essay “The Body and The Archive,” a brief interpretation of traditional photographic techniques developed in the late nineteenth century for scientific purposes and for social reform as a background for Opie’s art. Using these sources, this thesis will demonstrate how Opie consciously manipulated traditional photographic codes in order to interpret the categorical “other” and thereby confront society with an alternative gender model.

This thesis will apply comparative formal analysis when interpreting Opie’s photographs as parodies of late nineteenth-century portrait photographs depicting the “other.” In addition, this study will approach this topic by emphasizing deconstructive methodologies in a semiotic analysis of scientific and social discourses of the queer body as seen in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This thesis will also employ a historical approach that will consider the social context of nineteenth-century photographic typologies and Opie’s socially charged portraits. Since Opie’s photographs focus on the construction of queer identity, it is essential for interpretations of her work to acknowledge her engagement with the social and medical discourses of both the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries from which the now dominant discourse on the queer body emerged.

## CHAPTER 1 THE HISTORY OF PHYSIOGNOMY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

“Homosexuality” as a term medically affixed to the body, thereby announcing the body’s identity, is a product of the nineteenth century. For this reason this thesis will compare Catherine Opie’s photographs of “homosexual” (specifically lesbian) bodies to nineteenth-century typologies that were “normalized” by photographic portraits. This study will argue that a large body of her work closely resembles and responds to nineteenth-century typological photographs of abnormal bodies (also known as the categorical “other”) which includes ethnic bodies, criminal bodies and unhealthy bodies. Typological photographs are photographic images of bodies that attempt to deny the subject his or her individuality and agency. These documentary photographs have been employed to outline, describe, or evidence categories or types of human beings in highly scientific, socio-anthropological contexts. The compositional techniques of nineteenth-century typological photographs were governed by such photographic codes as the centrality of the face and head, a shallow compositional space, full frontal positioning of the body, a bare background, and the theatrical positioning of gesture and props.

Before one can comprehend Opie’s manipulation of traditional portrait codes, one must first understand the process by which bodies, including lesbian bodies, have been historically interpreted as “other” and also discern how the “other” has subsequently been framed through portrait photography. These two discourses can be

seen as originating in the nineteenth century for the following reasons: (1) obviously enough, photography was invented in the late 1830s and early 1840s and (2) the categories separating the “normal” body from the “other” developed out of the taxonomical impulses of the empirical, positivistic sensibilities of this time.

The drive to categorize human bodies is a direct result of two significant factors occurring during the nineteenth century: (1) interests in social and moral reform increased, and (2) the Western world, particularly America and England, began to experience a rise in urbanization and industrialization.<sup>4</sup> These two factors are in fact intertwined. With new strides toward capitalism, a more fluid society was emerging. Higher economic classes were becoming more interconnected with lower economic ones. Citizens in the lower rungs of society were gaining opportunities for social mobility, immigration was on the rise, and racial equilibrium was on the threshold of existence. The beginnings of the feminist movement was gaining power in the late nineteenth century as it attempted to win for women the same opportunities as those being extended to men. The growing urban classes were less attached to such traditional authoritarian structures as class division, female subservience, religious judgment and racial hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> This liberated lifestyle was attractive to agrarian society;

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<sup>4</sup> James Ryan, “Photographing the Natives,” in *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 173.

<sup>5</sup> Howard L. Kushner, “Suicide, Gender and the Fear of Modernity in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Medical and Social Thought,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 464.

consequently traditional class structures, including family power relations, moral codes and social and gender hierarchies were breaking down.<sup>6</sup>

Upper-class, white, patriarchal authorities in Western countries such as Austria, England, France, Germany, and the United States felt the need to define ideal behavioral roles and identities so that they could judge evil, threatening, undeserving and incompetent behavior. Bodies and identities were thereby labeled, and the categorical “other” was thus conceived. These divisions were drawn and mapped most notably under the scientific scrutiny of the medical profession.

Medical divisions of normal people and others provided society with a scientific vocabulary that validated the sustainment and perpetuation of body categories and types. However, the medical field and civilian society needed the knowledge to access immediately body types for protection, regulation and treatment.<sup>7</sup> At the same time and partially as a result of the clinical and diagnostic approach to types regarded as embodiments of pathologies, society grasped onto modes of knowledge that offered them ready access for gauging the internal character of strangers, using empirical techniques of observation. The otherwise invisible and intangible traits that authorities wished to access and measure include health, criminality, gender and sexual orientation. Society therefore experienced a revived interest in physiognomy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kushner, “Suicide, Gender”, 461.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9, no 2 (Summer 1995): 57.

<sup>8</sup> Sander Gilman, *Seeing the Insane* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982), 178.

Swiss theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater anticipated this scientific method in the late eighteenth century in such publications as “*Essays on physiognomy of the promotion of knowledge and the love of mankind*,” originally published in Germany in 1783.<sup>9</sup> Essentially, he believed that through reading external features of a body, particularly head and facial features, one is able to gain access to the internal character of that person. Simply put, Lavater’s program equated seeing with knowing. His idea of physiognomy was widely accepted with little critical questioning. The method was fabricated under the guise of scientific fact, and a new myth was created that seemed to replace more superstitious views.

Employed in criminology and ethnography, physiognomy also became part of the advancing field of medical sciences, including the emerging field of sexology. Society gave medical “doctors” the power to observe bodies and their exterior signs and symptoms in order to make supposedly accurate diagnoses and thereby treat patients. Medical doctors thus became the neo-sages of the modern world. Validating the mythical wisdom of the medical doctor was the newly invented power of the clinical gaze that Foucault has so aptly analyzed.<sup>10</sup>

Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic* analyzes concepts formative to the clinical gaze. He examines the historical development of the perceived wisdom of the post-French Revolutionary medical doctors. He begins by raising the question of how physicians escaped the Enlightenment’s rejection of esoteric knowledge:

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<sup>9</sup> Lavater’s “*Essays on physiognomy of the promotion of knowledge and the love of mankind*,” 1783, is cited as the model for later physiological studies in Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 151.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 45.

How can the free gaze that medicine, and, through it, the government, must turn upon the citizens be equipped and competent without being embroiled in the esotericisms of knowledge and the rigidity of social privilege?<sup>11</sup>

Foucault's answer was the post-Enlightenment invention of the "gaze." The clinical gaze could supposedly "penetrate illusion and see through to the underlying reality...the physician had the power to see the hidden truth."<sup>12</sup> What was fundamentally invisible was suddenly offered the bright clarity through the auspices of the medical gaze.

Gaining the power of the gaze, these doctors acquired the ability to redirect esoteric knowledge to ends now construed to be scientific because, unlike their ancient counterparts, they relied on pure observation and ignored theory. It was commonly understood that empiricism was a cornerstone of the scientific realm; theory remained embroiled in the philosophical realm. According to Foucault,

The theoretical, it was thought, was the element of perpetual change, the starting point of all the historical variations in medical knowledge, the locus of conflicts and disappearances; it was in this theoretical element that medical knowledge marked its fragile relativity. The clinic, on the other hand, was thought to be the element of its positive accumulation: it was this constant gaze upon the patient, this age-old, yet ever renewed attention that enabled medicine not to disappear

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> L. Shawyer, *Notes on Reading Birth of the Clinic*, <http://www.california.com/~rathbone/foucabc.html>, 16 March 2002.

entirely with each new speculation, but to preserve itself, to assume little / by little the figure of a truth that is definitive, if not completed, in short, to develop, below the level of the noisy episodes of its history, in a continuous historicity. In the non-variable of the clinic, medicine, it was thought, had bound truth and time together.<sup>13</sup>

The prestige of the clinical gaze was enhanced by the invention of a categorical system of description that according to Foucault, “made it appear that all diseases [i.e. bodies outside the norm] fit within a definitive network of classification.”<sup>14</sup> As a scientist, the physician was now armed with both the power to penetrate illusion, by gaining access to bodily secrets and a vocabulary to diagnose and communicate wisely about proper treatment.

This history of the clinical gaze highlights the process by which practitioners operating under the guise of scientific method in the nineteenth century dissected and mapped the human body thereby categorizing bodies and identities. The medical doctor, whom Foucault analyzes, is not far removed from other practitioners using the human body as their subject. In this new society of the medical profession, persons were now hailed as subjects according to categorical labels and were made both visible and available to the clinical gaze. The constructed scientific method of physiognomy had become a means used to achieve subjective and morally judgmental ends.

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, 54-55.

<sup>14</sup> L. Shawyer, *Notes on Reading Birth of the Clinic*, <http://www.california.com/~rathbone/foucbc.html>, 16 March 2002.

## Sexology and the New Taxonomy of Gendered Bodies

Given the fragile state of upper-class patriarchy, it is not surprising that an overwhelming attack on advancing feminist movements erupted during the Victorian era in Great Britain and the United States. A growing interest in the sexual nature of the human body was powered by efforts to provide scientific evidence that bodies are biologically susceptible to particular gender characteristics that govern the abilities of said bodies. In short, the Western world sought scientific proof that upper-class white men were superior, thus reinforcing the belief that women, minorities, and citizens lower economic classes are inferior.

Medical discourses on gender and sexuality had existed for centuries, but the nineteenth century elevated sexology to a new level, hailing its wide acceptance as a reputable scientific field of study that steadfastly obeyed laws of objectivity and logic. A rigid, binary gender code was used by sexologists as a constant variable by which they measured all bodies. Masculinity and femininity were measured via physiognomic observation, resulting in the newly invented homosexual body. Sexologists viewed the homosexual body from an essentialist platform, believing that their subjects' behavior and identity was scientifically governed and biologically determined.<sup>15</sup> Supported as an objective authority, scientific evidence of biologically determined sexuality and exterior symptoms of sexual identity was used to justify both social tolerance and oppression.

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<sup>15</sup> The essentialist argument is opposed to a more post-modern constructivist theory that believes sexuality represents a social construction of identity.

Scientific vocabulary interpellating each sexually categorized body became naturalized through its widespread reproduction. The first published record of the term “homosexual” occurred in 1869, when it was used by the Swiss doctor, Karoly Maria Benkert. The word was widely subscribed to by the English in the 1890’s when sexologist Havelock Ellis adopted it. In 1883, the term “lesbian” was first employed; it appeared in the British medical journal, *Alienist and Neurologist*, in an editorial documentary of the life of Lucy Ann Lobdell.<sup>16</sup>

Examining the discourse on same sex dynamics from a constructivist platform, in his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault analyzes how the homosexual body was developed in the nineteenth century. He writes, “the nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history...Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.”<sup>17</sup> He claims that the overall discourse of nineteenth-century medicine persuaded such “taxonomical impulses” that resulted in the creation of the “homosexual” body.<sup>18</sup> According to the recent, popular discourse on homosexuality, developing from postmodern theory, gender definitions lie not in the natural human body, but rather are myths invented by the current societal regimes. Accordingly, the myth of the “mannish lesbian,” propagated through an earlier developed medical

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<sup>16</sup> A hunter by trade, Lucy Ann Lobdell lived her life as Joseph Lobdell in New York. She and Marie Perry married themselves in 1868. Lobdell was later declared insane for her male behavior and institutionalized for the last 40 years of her life. Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Meridian, 1992), 214-221.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 43.

<sup>18</sup> So exact were the taxonomical impulses, that Austrian psychiatrist von Krafft-Ebing, in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, one of the many works on this subject, included 238 individual histories and 437 pages by the time that its 12<sup>th</sup> edition appeared in 1903. Mandy Merck, *Perversions: Deviant Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 87, 88.

discourse on female homosexuality, has existed now for over a century practically unchanged.

Insight into the understanding of the nineteenth-century medical gaze outlining such discourses on lesbianism survives in the journals of Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, writings of social reformer Havelock Ellis, and several published representations of perceived lesbians.<sup>19</sup> Sexuality, which had been heretofore invisible, began to be addressed on the basis of appearances so that some differences from established norms were assumed to be indicative of sexuality such as clothing, gait, muscular build, etc. Therefore, influenced by the prejudicial views of the dominant medical discourse on lesbianism, common representations of lesbian women were thought to differ from heterosexual women through their heightened masculine attributes. Feminine theorist Lucy Bland notes that while Ellis “challenged the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual, he concurred with other sexologists in portraying the lesbian as a gruff, often grotesque mannish figure.”<sup>20</sup> He assumed that sexual “inverts” could be “visually distinguishable from the ‘normal’ body through anatomical markers, just as the differences between the sexes had traditionally been

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<sup>19</sup> Ellis’ “The Theory of Sexual Inversion,” 1897, argued that homosexuality is an inborn trait and should not be seen as criminal. Unlike Krafft-Ebing, Ellis recognized that being homosexual was an “instinct,” and therefore is a natural phenomenon. Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, “The Theory of Sexual Inversion” in *Nineteenth Century Writings on Homosexuality, a Sourcebook*, ed. Charles White (Boston: Rutledge, 1999), 99-101.

<sup>20</sup> Lucy Bland, *Sexology in Culture: Labeling Bodies and Desires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

mapped upon the body.”<sup>21</sup> Ellis’ contemporary, Krafft-Ebing described the medical subcategory of congenital subversion that afflicted lesbian women in case number 160 of the twelfth edition of his *Psychopathia Sexualis*:

Her love for sport, smoking and drinking, her preference for clothes cut in the fashion of men, her lack of skill in and liking for female occupations, her love for the study of obtuse and philosophical subjects, her gait and carriage, severe features, deep voice, robust skeleton, powerful muscles and absence of adipose layers have the stamp of masculine character.<sup>22</sup>

Such description exemplifies, according to feminist author and theorist Mandy Merck, the “newly invented medium, the visualization of social-sexual deviance as an image of the body, whose every feature—from carriage to clothing—is biologically ordained and medically legible.”<sup>23</sup> The ensuing portrait of the lesbian is therefore both a sign that describes the *individual* and operates as an inscription of a *social identity*.<sup>24</sup>

This historic reconstruction of sexology brings to light the incredible cultural impact of sexology and its definition of the lesbian body. Although historians largely

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<sup>21</sup> Siobhan Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” in *Sexology in Culture: Labeling Bodies and Desires*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 63.

<sup>22</sup> Krafft-Ebing’s case number 160 recounted the case of “Mrs. von T.” who reportedly was witnessed to have “fallen upon the neck of a lady guest, covered her profoundly with kisses and caressed her like a lover, thus causing a scandal.” This case is cited in Merck, *Perversions*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> Merck, *Perversions*, 90-91.

<sup>24</sup> Merck, *Perversions*, 91.

ignore their existence, lesbians were recognized by society and discriminated against at the dawn of first wave feminism (1870-1920). As part of the categorical “other,” they were arrested for acts of sexual deviance including cross-dressing. In 1904, Anna Ruhling addressed members of Hirschfeld’s Scientific Humanitarian Committee after a public refusal by the feminist movement to deal with the issue of homosexuality and the rights of its Uranian (lesbian) members, stating

When we consider all the gains that homosexual women have for decades achieved for the women’s movement, it can only be regarded as astounding that the big and influential organizations of this movement have up to now not raised one finger to secure for their not insignificant number of Uranian members their just rights as far as the state and society are concerned.<sup>25</sup>

The embedded cultural stereotype of the deviant, mannish lesbian body, conveyed through textual and other means, further fueled discrimination and oppression. Medical texts, fictional literature, visual representations and social policies propagated reproduction of stereotypes and facilitated their sustainability.

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<sup>25</sup> Anna Ruhling quoted in Annemarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: an Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 44.

## Photographs Framing Identity

Reproduction and sustainability of the stereotypes of those deemed “other” were largely propagated via photographic images used in medical texts. While medical images depicting specifically “lesbian” bodies were not prevalent, images of mentally deviant bodies were. The mentally ill body can be evaluated as a parallel to the lesbian body--a body deemed biologically deviant in its sexual behavior. American theorist Xavier Mayne provides insight into the increasing practice of committing homosexual women to insane asylums. In his published history of homosexual life at the turn of the century he stated, “the Uraniad [lesbian] significantly helps to fill insane asylums and sanitariums.”<sup>26</sup> In his essay “The Theory of Sexual Inversion,” Ellis acknowledges the comparison between the homosexual body and insanity that was often upheld by society:<sup>27</sup> Ellis’ introduction to “The Theory of Sexual Inversion” follows:

What is sexual inversion? Is it, as many would have us believe, an abominable acquired vice, to be stamped out by the prison? Or is it, as a few assert, a beneficial variety of human emotion which should be tolerated or even fostered?

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<sup>26</sup> Xavier Mayne, “The Intersexes: A History of Semiesexualism as a Problem in Social Life, 1909,” in *Nineteenth Century Writings on Homosexuality: a Sourcebook*, ed. Charles White (Boston: Routledge, 1999), 110. American theorist Mayne was a follower of Karl Heinrich Ulrich. Ulrich provided one of the earliest and most important classification schemes in a series of pamphlets privately published by himself in the early 1860s. His classifications “Dionings,” “Urnings,” and “Uranodionings” parallel current classifications “heterosexual,” “homosexual,” and “bisexual.” Randall L. Sell, *How Do You Define Sexual Orientation?*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/content/defining.html>, 18 November 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Ellis and Symonds, “Sexual Inversion,” 99-101.

Is it a diseased condition which qualifies its subject for the lunatic asylum? Or is it a natural monstrosity, a human 'sport,' the manifestations of which must be regulated when they become anti-social? There is probably an element of truth in more than one of these views.<sup>28</sup>

This popular comparison between homosexuals and insanity combined with the substantial presence of lesbian women living in sanitariums throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allows one to understand common interpretations of the homosexual body as the equivalent of the insane body. Representational contexts regarding the insane body are therefore helpful in exploring the history of the homosexual identity. For this reason, this thesis will examine several photographic images of insane bodies to explain the traditional techniques employed by scientists to frame the subject, thus reproducing the type of stereotypical vocabulary that identifies bodies outside the normal realm of being.

Upon its invention, the photograph was viewed as an instant documentation of its referent. French semiologist Roland Barthes, explaining the historical reliance on photographic truth in *Camera Lucida*, writes, "a specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent, or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent."<sup>29</sup> He goes on to explain, "the photograph is indifferent to all

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<sup>28</sup> Ellis and Symonds, "Sexual Inversion," 99.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 5.

intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself.”<sup>30</sup> This “power of authenticity” contributed to the introduction of photography into scientific fields of study.<sup>31</sup> Documentary photography emerged as an effort to classify data in order to communicate broad sweeping ideas about it.<sup>32</sup> The photograph was consequently acknowledged as both evidence and record, believed intrinsically to possess an evidential force. Artist and photography critic Allan Sekula explains, “Photography, according to this belief, reproduces the visible world; the camera is an engine of fact...independent of human practice.”<sup>33</sup> The documentary discourse, hence, pronounced the field’s power of authenticity and its objectivity. Contrary to this idea, postmodernism acknowledges that although photographs seemingly record evidence with flawless detail, they are in fact highly polysemic in character. A particular photograph can be interpreted differently according to a variety of variables regarding the viewing of that image. Additionally, a photographed event can be manipulated by the photographer in several ways while that photograph continues to retain its assumed truth and objectivity.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes coined the phrase “power of authenticity” in *Camera Lucida*, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Cherise Smith, “Fragmented Documents: Works by Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Willie Robert Middlebrook in The Art Institute of Chicago,” in *African Americans in Art: Selections from the Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1999), 110-111.

<sup>33</sup> Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1987-1983* (Halifax, N.S., Canada: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 56.

<sup>34</sup> For more information on the polysemic character of the photograph, refer to Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*.

The invention of photography benefited from a vast landscape of theories concerning identity. The ontology of photography depended on its assumed authentic representation of the real. Photography was thus elevated to having the capability of providing a window of truth—it made visible what was invisible. Parallel to this appropriation of power to photography was the nineteenth century’s dependency on physiognomy. The notion of image as truth and the reliability of appearances supported photography as much as photography in turn helped sustain and encourage these dependencies. Photography therefore became both a tool used to identify its subject as well as a tool used by the subject to project identities they wished to be perceived as real.

The gaze, with its foundations in physiognomy, and the “nosography” of diseases were validated and authoritative through perpetual reinforcement. The introduction of photography to the medical field facilitated this reinforcement. Like the gaze, photography records and totalizes. Its “powers” were very much interconnected with the continuing acceptance of physiognomy. Since it captured the exterior image of an individual with flawless accuracy and conviction, its product was highly accepted as an evidential record. Physiognomists could supposedly read a photographic image of an individual and interpret their inner character practically as well as they could if they were to observe the individual in person.<sup>35</sup> Photographs were considered reliable, infallible records of physical evidentiary truth. The profession of the photographer and the scientist grew closer and at times merged together. Like the scientist, the photographer’s gaze was assumed to be distanced, separated, and objective. The

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<sup>35</sup> Gilman, *Seeing the Insane*, 167.

photograph seemed to constitute an authorless text.<sup>36</sup> Photography was therefore part of the hierarchical observation of the scientific gaze, and the camera entered the realm of the scientific discourse of medicine as an instrument for surveying and measuring human body types.

The nineteenth-century photographic archive provides much evidence of the highly influential and widely accepted field of physiognomy. When viewing images of people, a viewer must acknowledge the difference between a photographic portrait and a photographic typology.<sup>37</sup> Generally photographs used to expand the photographic archive of a scientific field (criminology, ethnography, medicine, etc...) are typologies. Typologies on the whole are organized according to set styles and compositions. The subject of the image according to historian Brian Wallis in "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," is "organized around a clear central axis with minimal external information."<sup>38</sup> Typologies are abstractions of individuality, whereas portrait photographs grant individuality to their subject. Portraits generally allow subjects to control their own image to a certain degree. Because individuality was generally granted to members of the higher classes, photographs of disenfranchised "others" are not viewed as images intended to express the individuality of the subjects. The image of the face, in these cases, is used to categorize rather than individualize. The face is understood in these cases as belonging more to the domain of the body than to a distinct individuality as it would be if viewed as part of a normal body. Normal minds

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<sup>36</sup> Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> See Figs. 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> Wallis, "Black Bodies," 54.

control body movements and facial expressions; however, the body, not the mind, controls expressions and behaviors of “others.” Photographic images of headshots of the mentally ill, criminals, black persons, etc. are therefore perceived as images of a body type.

Interpretation of a photographic image as an image depicting a body type outside normality was perpetuated through the practice of convincing the public to read images in ways especially particular when such subjects were popularized. With its ease of mass reproduction, photography was a medium available to large numbers of viewers. It became part of popular culture. As part of mainstream culture, both photography and science encoded certain body types belonging to “the other”. A “regime of truth” was therefore established by the constant play and productivity of a relay of signs.<sup>39</sup> With its association with science, the photograph was used as a vehicle to create, validate, and authorize codes of insanity, criminality and social hierarchies.

Images of the insane body type are evidence of the socially manipulative power of typological photographs. By the 1850’s photography was beginning to be applied to the study of the mentally ill. Only five years later, photographs illustrating the mentally ill were being used as teaching aids to train medical students.<sup>40</sup> In 1858, Sir Alexander Morrison compiled photographs of over 100 cases of mental illness, each accompanied

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<sup>39</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Feminism/Foucault, Surveillance/Sexuality,” in *Visual Culture*, ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holley, and Kieth Moxey (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>40</sup> Gilman, *Seeing the Insane*, 173.

by descriptive “medical” texts.<sup>41</sup> And in 1887, William Noyes, following the work of anthropologist Sir Francis Galton’s criminological composite maps, gathered photographs of the insane in order to catalogue general appearances and illustrate distinct pathologies.<sup>42</sup> These typologies were used to reinforce constructed, “scientific” definitions and symptoms of a body type, which heretofore had been previously undetected by the human eye.

Educated scholars of the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries chose to frame patients in a scientifically conventional manner by continuing to reinforce the fabricated codes that identify subjects as insane and by extending stereotypical interpretations of their represented bodies. These images code the body in a variety of ways, including presenting them as medical subjects, stereotypes, others in general, and criminals. These images further regulate normal bodies by determining the norm with the implication that anything in excess or deficient of that median will be termed “other.” Typological photographs of the insane frame individuals as medical subjects by isolating them from society as a whole as well as dividing them into specific categories. Previously regarded as members of mainstream society, even if they were seen as existing on its margins, these persons were hailed as mental patients, who were made visible and available to the clinical gaze. The accepted conventional compositions for

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<sup>41</sup> Adrienne Burrows and Iwan Schumaker, *Portraits of the Insane: the Case of Dr. Diamond* (London, Quartlet Books, 1990), 39.

<sup>42</sup> Gilman, *Seeing the Insane*, 188.

these people are clearly defined and rigorously adhered to: the bodies posed frontally or in profile in the center of the frame.<sup>43</sup>

Healthy and insane bodies were commonly subjected to binary codes of ugly/beautiful, sick/healthy, moronic/intelligent, etc (quite similar to the manner in which men and women were beginning to be subjected to strict binary codes of gender). Images depicting insane bodies often played on the then stereotypical perception of the insane as ugly, sick, and moronic. Photographs reinforced such stereotypes through posture, gesture, gaze, and props. For example, photographs of the insane focused on aspects of the patients' bodies that reinforce these stereotypical perceptions—images of women with disheveled hair and clothing haphazardly placed on their bodies as well as pictures of patients grinning foolishly with missing teeth, etc.<sup>44</sup> Photographs of patients suffering from “religious melancholy” presented patients decorated with religious props, signifying such a diagnosis.<sup>45</sup> Photographs also heightened aspects of patients' purported illnesses through gestures and gazes. Patients suffering from melancholy are shown with downcast eyes, gazing out into space, or staring blankly, while manic patients look directly at the viewer with angry stares or heightened energy. Melancholic patients appear sorrowful.<sup>46</sup> Cases of “imbecility” are notable for the subjects' parted

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<sup>43</sup> Wallis, “Black Bodies,” 54.

<sup>44</sup> See Figs. 3, 4.

<sup>45</sup> See Fig. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Compare the two images in Fig.6.

lips.<sup>47</sup> Some photographers went as far as altering photographs to produce desired effects.<sup>48</sup> They darkened the eyes and parted the lips of their subjects to allow the photographs to be more easily read as documents of imbecile persons.

Photographs of insane patients mimic compositions used in criminology, further identifying them as criminals.<sup>49</sup> These patients are photographed frontally or in profile as are criminals in mug shots.<sup>50</sup> Frontal poses signify the subjects' lack of privacy since they are placed on exhibit. These patients are subjected to the control of the camera, the doctor, the institution, and the state. A popular pose for photographs of the mentally ill shows their hands and arms bound.<sup>51</sup> This position reminds viewers that the patients' behaviors and/or movements must be controlled. Even when the straight jacket is not shown—and it rarely is—the patient's hands are clasped, their arms are wrapped around them or folded, or their hands/arms are hidden from view.

Cloaked in the armor of scientific rationality, nineteenth-century photographers satisfied desires to know and explore physical and tangible bodies. Physicians were given the power to explore patients' thoughts and behaviors via fabricated myths of clinical gazes and its physiological validations. Their photographs are signs of physicians' control over both diseases and minds. The nineteenth-century discourse of

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<sup>47</sup> See Fig. 7.

<sup>48</sup> See Fig. 8.

<sup>49</sup> See Figs. 9-11. Note Fig. 10. This photograph of a criminal is similar to photographs of the insane type in regard to the unavailable gaze of the subject.

<sup>50</sup> See Fig. 12.

<sup>51</sup> See Fig. 13.

medicine and photography legitimized the construction of the insane body for managing diseased and deviant individuals.<sup>52</sup> In turn, these discourses prescribed the range for normality as well. Psychiatry established a standard of deviance, proclaiming that any behavior beyond this norm constituted insane. Photography further enabled society to identify and isolate the ultimate threat to the ideal.<sup>53</sup> Varieties of mental disorder were categorized according to proportionate levels of “pride, anger, suspicion, mirth, love, fear, grief, etc,” which were deemed either normal or insane, and could be photographed as such.<sup>54</sup> The camera therefore became an instrument of surveillance and social control.<sup>55</sup> It encoded the insane body through rhetoric of posture, gesture, position in space, and relationship to viewer.<sup>56</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, photography, according to historian Sander Gilman, was seen as totally uncontaminated by the interpretive problems inherent in language.<sup>57</sup> Subsequently, scholars of both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries failed to realize the fallacies of reification and ranking inherent in both photography and physiognomy.<sup>58</sup> Examining these typological photographs of a scientific archive within

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<sup>52</sup> Pollock, “Feminism/Foucault,” 36.

<sup>53</sup> Wallis, “Black Bodies,” 56.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Morison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London, 1843; New York: Arno, 1976), 1, quoted in Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians*, 155.

<sup>55</sup> Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>56</sup> Pollock, “Feminism/Foucault,” 20.

<sup>57</sup> Gilman, *Seeing the Insane*, 189.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1981), 24.

the clinical and social/political discourse further demonstrate how culture influences not only what we see but also how we see it and then naturalize it.

As a photographic medium, typologies were easily reproduced and widely circulated. Their presence was nothing short of a broad-based social and political ideology used to marginalize and oppress the fabricated categorical “other” while glorifying and securing white, Western patriarchy. Typological images, as we have seen, spawned stereotypical prejudices and preconceptions of groups of individuals outside the realm of “normality.” These images in turn actively function to perpetuate stereotypes and ensure their survival over time. As theorist Judith Butler explains, meanings are produced and reproduced by the daily repetition of actions.<sup>59</sup> In order to change the cycle, a mutation must occur, allowing for a new sign to be repeated.

The appearance of sexology and psychiatry in the nineteenth century made possible the formation of such a reverse discourse. As Foucault wrote, “homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.”<sup>60</sup>

Catherine Opie agrees, explaining, “if you use a language people understand, a formal language, there’s still this way of seducing the viewer...once this happens, then

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<sup>59</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-84*, trans. David J. Parent, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 101, quoted in Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 82.

people can read the multiple layers into the photograph.”<sup>61</sup> By constructing images using essentially the same conventions that produced stereotypical images, Opie confronts the viewer by shedding light on absurdities and fallacies in both the images themselves and the context from which they were created. Interested in how communities and languages are formed, she approaches her subject with a postmodern view. According to her, the perceived identity of a lesbian woman is merely an arbitrary label which has been perpetuated over time. In order to avoid perpetuating stereotypes, our society must interrogate such conventions in order to shed light on their limitations. Adopting similar compositions and techniques used in nineteenth-century portraiture and typologies while photographing the lesbian “other,” Opie explores how a visual archive, functioning as a language has produced the fictive constructions of stereotypical identities identified as “other,” and how it has since supported false images of authenticity through such visual representations. Her photographs, similar to mutations, alter the vicious cycle of stereotype reproduction by offering alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and behaving. She in turn forces the viewer to question the discourse of documentary photography, understand its dysfunctions, acknowledge its role in the past, and reassess its meaning in the present. Essentially, she has used documentary photography to comment on its inherent fallacies as well as the fallacies associated with this discursive field.

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<sup>61</sup> Malik Gaines, “Opie’s Opus,” *The Advocate*, 19 December 2000, 52.

## CHAPTER 2 OPIE FRAMING IDENTITY TO PROPAGATE FLUID GENDER IDENTITY

Catherine Opie's first notable works were created during an intense period of self-experimentation in the United States. After the style-oriented sixties, the general public began to crave pluralism in its art; it was following mainstream society's exhaustion of modern thought and its failure to embody purity and objectivity with a desire for an open-ended approach. Part of this new development was a need to acknowledge and accept identity politics by pushing societal understanding of the human body to its extremes. The body became a site of self experimentation—sexually, anatomically, and aesthetically—such that in each successive decade in the late twentieth century body piercing, tattooing, and head shaving became cult practices of popular youth. Work by artists such as Dawoud Bey, Carrie Mae Weems, Yong Soon Min, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, which commented on pluralistic human identities and made positive commentaries on minority communities became increasingly popular during this time. Exhibitions focusing on minority and identity themes included the widely acclaimed Whitney Biennials of 1993 and 1995, which examined self-definition and community identity through the works of contemporary artists.<sup>62</sup> While the 1993 Biennial explored race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, the 1995 Biennial focused more

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<sup>62</sup> 1993 Whitney Biennial head curator was Elizabeth Sussman. In 1995, Klaus Kertess was appointed head curator for the show.

heavily on sexuality. This particular theme was evident in works by Mathew Barney, Nicole Eisenman, Nan Goldin, John O'Reilly, and Cindy Sherman.

When comparing Opie's work, which was included in the 1995 Biennial with pieces by other queer artists in the 1990s such as Nicole Eisenman or G.B. Jones, one immediately notices the lack of stylized "camp" imagery in her art.<sup>63</sup> Her work is not overtly sexual, over-passionate, exaggerated, or extravagant, nor can it be described as coming from a distinct "gay" sensibility. Unlike typical camp imagery, her work, while playful, does not attempt to dethrone the serious.<sup>64</sup> Opie's targeted audience was not specifically queer; therefore, her work needed to employ imagery familiar and palatable to mainstream audiences. Explaining this approach Opie has stated, "When I first started making work I tailored it for the heterosexual community because I was terrified that I'd never have a career if I didn't."<sup>65</sup> Her opportunity to explore queer themes within the realm of mainstream culture benefited greatly from risks taken by earlier photographers

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<sup>63</sup> In my discussion of gay and lesbians of the postmodern period, I will be using the terms "queer," "gay," and "lesbian" rather than "homosexual." "Gay" and "lesbian" are more contemporary terms than "homosexual." "Homosexual" is a term that does not allow for the distinction between men and women. It is necessary for this thesis to distinguish between these groups. The term "queer" commonly refers to contemporary gay, lesbian, and transgendered communities because it more appropriately describes their culture, politics, *and* society—the term is more fluid and all-inclusive; "homosexual," on the other hand, is a medical term that is more appropriately used when discussing gays and lesbians in reference to the scientific, sexual categorizations existing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theorist Simon Watney writes, "To describe oneself as a "homosexual" is immediately to inhabit a pseudo-scientific theory of sexuality which more properly relates to the age of the steam engine than to the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century." Simon Watney, "Homosexual, Gay or Queer? Activism, Outgoing and the Politics of Sexual Identities," *Outrage*, April, 1992, 20, quoted by Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 72.

<sup>64</sup> "Camp" is a distinct aesthetic phenomenon often associated with gay culture. It is a style or sensibility that is created from a spirit of extravagance. Critic Susan Sontag defines the term in her "Notes on Camp," which was published in 1964 (Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" in *Art Theory and Criticism*, ed. Sally Everett (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1991), 96-109.

<sup>65</sup> Harmony Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America: a Contemporary History* (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 150.

such as Tee Corrine, Joan E. Biren and Nancy Rosenblum and by the social space cleared by anti-censorship radicals, feminists, and gay rights movements.<sup>66</sup> She is both a product of such struggles and also a contributor to their gains.

Her studies at CalArts, providing her with a firm understanding of the history of photography and feminist criticism, nourished the theoretical frameworks of her photographic archive.<sup>67</sup> In an interview with Maura Reilly, Opie spoke in depth about her studies at CalArts, where she noted Abigail Solomon Godeau, Susan Sontag and Judith Williamson as influential theorists.<sup>68</sup> In reading works by these theorists, Opie most likely would have been introduced to a variety of approaches including theories of French linguistics and semiotics (Derrida), postmodern phenomenology (Foucault) and other postmodern theorists.

Highly polysemic and postmodern in character, Opie's work consists of several series of portraits, including *Being and Having* (1991), *Portraits* (1993-1996), and *Domestic Series* (1998). Her *Portraits* and *Being and Having*, both of which are a series of staged portraits, are saturated with absurdity and sarcasm, while her later work is arguably more "natural" and sincere as she explores every-day life through snapshot portraiture. Each series explores the ideas of community, language and identity, and responds to the contexts of each of them. Opie is strongly aware of both social and artistic history when she creates her photographs, particularly the history of lesbian

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<sup>66</sup> Connie Samaras, "Feminism, Photography, Censorship, and Sexually Transgressive Imagery," *New York Law School Review* 38, no. 1-4 (Spring-Summer 1993): 92.

<sup>67</sup> Reilly, "The Drive to Describe," 88.

<sup>68</sup> Reilly, "Drive to Describe," 89.

politics and social performativity. Demonstrating such consciousness, Opie compares the gender performances of those photographed in her portraits, stating:

Cross-dressing has a long history for lesbians, from women who passed as men in the military to the aristocratic women who dressed as men in the salons in Paris in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the working-class butches of the bars in Paris in the '30s and New York in the '50s.<sup>69</sup>

In consideration of this subject, Opie's work helps to make up for the relative invisibility of the lesbian community. Stereotyped as a thief of masculine identity, the lesbian has traditionally been feared as a threat to male-dominated society. Consequently, few examples of lesbian imagery exist. Lesbian imagery that did exist represented masculine lesbians as evil predators. The "feminine" lesbian was perceived as a victim, not necessarily an active participant in a lesbian lifestyle, presumably not "really" lesbian at all. Early representational lesbian literature and imagery such as the 1940s-60s pulp paperback *Warped Desire*, portrayed lesbians as primarily sexual beings created for the erotic pleasure of male gaze. The majority of lesbian imagery exists today in pornographic publications created for the sole satisfaction of the male gaze.<sup>70</sup>

As a lesbian photographer, Opie has participated in the opportunity to provide political and social visibility to the lesbian communities across America by exploring

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<sup>69</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 152.

<sup>70</sup> Jan Zita Grover, "Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation" in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 171-172.

their identity through portraiture and exhibiting these images within mainstream galleries and museums. Opie describes herself as “a kind of twisted social documentary photographer” because of her obvious manipulations of the photographed subject.<sup>71</sup> She documents mostly lesbians from the queer leather community of Los Angeles, offering them social visibility through photography, thus providing them a means for social progression. Opie’s images of women literally labeled as “dykes” and “perverts” call attention to the burdens of identity and preconceptions which are relevant to the way such women construct their identity. These identifying labels persuade society to expect a stereotypical image from a person of these identities; however, the persons in Opie’s portraits appear particularly depressed, leading the viewer to suspect they are unhappy or unfulfilled by their labels. Unfortunately, for several members of these communities, societal expectations regarding behavior and appearance bind individuals to stereotypical performance associated with the corresponding identity. Opie’s particular style and photographic methods dissolve such preconceptions, allowing the viewer to recognize and denaturalize lesbians’ social place within the realm of the categorical “other.” Her appropriation of typological imagery provides an immediate comparison between present stereotypes of queer individuals and a negative historical discourse of physiognomy. Opie has personally experienced the burden placed upon her by society to identify in expected stereotypical ways. Commenting on her experiences within the queer leather community she said,

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<sup>71</sup>Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 150.

At first it was a little scary to me and I thought “this is sick, I’m a pervert” but soon I realized those beliefs were something I’d been taught and they really had nothing to do with the experience I was having. The leather scene was about community for me, and I was inspired by all these people who were giving themselves the freedom to image themselves however they saw fit.<sup>72</sup>

While Opie appears to emphasize community identity, following an “ethnic” approach to gay and lesbian activism, she simultaneously advocates a “liberationist” viewpoint by pursuing freedom from the constraints of sex/gender systems and “normative structures.”<sup>73</sup>

Catherine Opie works in two sizes, sixty-by-thirty-inch portraits, presenting full figures, and close-up forty-by-thirty-inch head-shots and three quarter format portraits of individuals performing or playing with gender stereotypes as subcultural attitudes.<sup>74</sup> Her subjects are often ambiguous in terms of their gender and occupy various positions along the gender continuum. The idea of a fluid gender system, where individuals occupy in-between and simultaneous states of gender performativity is at the central focus of

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<sup>72</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 150.

<sup>73</sup> During the nineties, Opie produced work that, like her contemporaries, promoted lesbian visibility as a community effort. However, she continued the promotion of a liberationist viewpoint, resulting in a struggle between subscribing to a “queer” or “lesbian” identity. Arguably, Opie’s *Portraits* do not promote a *single identity* to which the lesbian *community* must subscribe. The terms “ethnic” and “liberationist” are defined in Jagose’s *Queer Theory: an Introduction*: a “liberationist” viewpoint advocates freedom from the constraints of traditional sex/gender systems, thereby promotes individual identities rather than community identities; an “ethnic” viewpoint, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of community identities such as African-American, Jewish, or lesbian. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 59.

<sup>74</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 150.

Opie's opus. For example, a lesbian can choose to be feminine or masculine; or feminine and masculine. Opie demonstrates such fluidity by focusing on the presence of costume—an element so specific to gender, yet so easily manipulated, borrowed, and cast aside. In one portrait, Opie characterizes herself as feminine through the imagery of a stick figure girl in a dress, in another portrait of herself dressed as a man, she portrays herself as a masculine. This idea of gender fluidity is in opposition to the traditional, binary gender model.

### Gender Theory

The traditional idea of gender, or the “binary gender model,” operates under the conditions that an individual falls into one sexual character or another depending on his or her “natural” disposition. Rigid gender codes resulted from the crisis of masculinity during the late nineteenth century. At this time there developed a feared disintegration in the power of the agrarian male. The beginnings of the feminist movement and the increasing awareness of a distinct homosexual body were the driving forces in this upset of traditional power. As desires for change in gender roles and gender confusion became more public, gender politics became more rigid. Gender codes were thus reinforced through invented behaviors and style of dress. For example, the “macho man” was invented in the late nineteenth century, differentiating himself from the earlier popular

model of the more effeminate male.<sup>75</sup> This newly invented masculine identity forced society to create a separate canon of dress, resulting in the creation of the sack suit.<sup>76</sup>

The suit thus became the symbolic icon of all that is male in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—self-control, dignity, success, and independence. Such strict codes of dress among both men and women were one of several attempts to exclude women, immigrants, and homosexuals. This traditional gender discourse was supported and sustained via the scientifically upheld dualistic nature of the heterosexual model. The postmodern view of gender, on the other hand, advocates a more fluid and diverse model that allows an individual to adopt aspects of both genders in varying degrees at the same time. This idea of gender multiplicity operates under the notion of gender as a constructed phenomenon. Elaborating on Foucault's theories of sex and power, Judith Butler contests the truth of gender itself. She states that identity is constructed through a manipulation and imitation of the several possibilities of identity existing in a society.<sup>77</sup> The identities one chooses to imitate may or may not conflict with one another. The individual should therefore not be limited to one single gendered role since he or she is operating, in varying degrees, within several roles.

Butler explains that drag, a practice of gender exploration, is an interplay of signs. She writes that it is not

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<sup>75</sup> Margorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 1.

<sup>76</sup> Rob Schorman, "What to Wear and How to Make It: The Meaning of Clothes in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Dress* 25 (1998): 65.

<sup>77</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theater Journal* 4 (1988): 519-531.

the performance of gender but rather the performance of the sign of gender, a sign that can only be appropriated, theatricalized, impersonated, and approximated because there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.<sup>78</sup>

Psychologist Darryl Hill compared this postmodern model to traditional gender structures in his article, “Deconstructing Gender Dualism through Transgendered Photography.” He states that “in the past, signs of sex and gender have been viewed as signifiers of absolute, real signifieds; but in the postmodern present, they only signify other signifiers, in an endless chain of significations.”<sup>79</sup> This concept of open-endedness correlates with the theories of French philosopher Jacques Derrida who stressed the relativity of the signified in his post-structuralist writings. According to Derrida, language, like gender, is constantly shifting as one signified calls forth others and yet still others.<sup>80</sup> The binary model of gender discourse limits full expression of the actualized fluidity of gendered identities.

Postmodernists such as Derrida, Foucault and Butler stress that gender is a social convention and merely appears to be a phenomenon that is linked only to the biological

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<sup>78</sup> Judith Butler quoted by Darryl B. Hill, “Deconstructing Gender Dualism Through Transgender Photography,” *Blackflash* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 10.

<sup>79</sup> Hill, “Deconstructing,” 11.

<sup>80</sup> Derrida’s ideas, though not specifically analyzing gender, have been applied to gender theory by Judith Butler in her work *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993).

sex of an individual. Butler explains, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”<sup>81</sup> In essence, gender is an arbitrary construction. Therefore, heterosexuality, “naturalized by the performative repetition of normative gender identities,” is also an arbitrary construction invented via pseudo-scientific means.

### Queer Photography

During the last decade of the twentieth century, gender politics and identity expression came center stage while postmodernism became more openly embraced by much of society. Postmodern gay studies, AIDS awareness, censorship politics, increased awareness of hate crimes and lesbian visibility all emerged as important issues during the nineties.<sup>82</sup> “The body,” in its many ramifications, became a major topic of discussion across the nation. Queer movements actually became a fashionable trend in New York and Los Angeles. Their fight was not only to bring down the heterosexual binary gender discourse limiting identity and to shatter oppressive homosexual stereotypes but queer individuals also wanted to show America that homosexuality can be a natural way of life.

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<sup>81</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 84.

<sup>82</sup> Kim Fullerton, “The Daddy Calls My Name in a Sultry Woman’s Voice,” in *Fabrications: Hamish Buchanan, Catherine Opie, and David Rasmus* (Toronto: Toronto Photographers’ Workshop, 1995), 7.

Queer photography became popularized during this struggle towards postmodern gender politics. Visible documentaries on homosexuality include the work of artists Deborah Bright, Robert Giard, Nan Goldin, and Catherine Opie. As images that expose “the other,” these documentaries echo the progress of postmodern scholars like Foucault and Butler who advocated the deconstruction of heterosexuality as the norm in order to gain a perspective on the shortcomings that accompany preexisting discourse on gender.

Maintaining the progressional gain made by postmodern theorists on gender politics, specifically Butler, Catherine Opie’s portraits deconstruct the gendered self by calling attention to the fallacies of traditional gender identities.<sup>83</sup> Her entire body of work has been commonly interpreted as a critical commentary on how communities adopt languages and later use those expressions to construct an outward expression of personally perceived inner identities in order for them to be communicated and read by a social audience. Agreeing with postmodern theorists like Butler, Opie advocates disarming the preexisting binary gender discourse in an effort to utilize a more fluid and diverse gender model.<sup>84</sup> She does this through manipulating our preconceived notion of “image as truth” which supports documentary photography’s trusted power of authentication. She follows the Barthesian philosophy that photographs have a highly polysemic character. Rather than inclining towards closure, Opie’s images instead tend towards openness of meaning. Opie uses photographic and semiotic languages from past and present to create her portraits. She blends typological compositions similar to the

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<sup>83</sup> Lebovici, “Destabilizing Gender,” 18.

<sup>84</sup> Fullerton, “The Daddy,” 4.

images of insane bodies with traditional portrait techniques such as brilliantly colored backgrounds and, at times, positioning her subjects so they are slightly turned away from the camera. Her use of props and theatricality, including costumes and fake mustaches, heightens the falsity of preconceived images of lesbian America. This manipulation present in Opie's works both validates cultural stereotypes of gender and destabilizes them. By presenting these images to an audience in a blatant and stylized manner, Opie comments on the absurdity of society's strong reliance on traditional gender rules such as unitary gender identity and prescribed gender behavior. Much of her work, as we will see, can further be interpreted as parodies on the constraining binary gender discourse developed in the nineteenth century, and the stereotypes which have followed, particularly the stereotype of the "mannish" lesbian. A parody places traditional codes of signs and signifieds in unfamiliar contexts to manipulate perception and shed new light on the issue at hand, often in an absurd and humorous way.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Opie imitates the nineteenth century typology, altering its "evidential" theme to create a ludicrous statement on its original intent. Manipulating the familiar codes and contexts associated with traditional portrait photography which developed from physiognomic discourses of stereotypes and identities, Opie in turn advocates a postmodern, fluid gender identity model.

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<sup>85</sup> Butler recognizes parody as a successful strategy of resistance to the traditional gender model. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 85.

## Being and Having

Critic Liz Kotz, in her article “Erotics of the Image,” states that Catherine Opie’s portraits document a “complex response to a history of abuse and survival” of the lesbian and gay subculture.<sup>86</sup> In response to their oppression by the semiotic and gender discourses of America, her subjects must subvert their identity by adopting the familiar languages of traditional gender codes in an attempt to survive and communicate in a heterosexual world of inescapable, dualistic realities. In her series *Being and Having*, Opie parodies the prevailing notion that (1) all lesbians want to be men, (2) that their only option, after rejecting femininity, is a masculine identity, and (3) that in order to *be* [male] you must *have* [a phallus].<sup>87</sup>

Opie has framed each image within a classic, mug-shot composition.<sup>88</sup> The mug-shot was first administered in the nineteenth century by Alphonse Bertillon, a Paris Police official and by British scientist Sir Francis Galton, to identify both criminals and criminal types.<sup>89</sup> The mug-shot, relying on physiognomic logic, maps specific facial features that identify the criminal type. The frontal position of the subject and the compositional exclusion of his or her body from neck down, denies the said subject the ability to present his or her self in a manner that portrays their personal expression.

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<sup>86</sup> Liz Kotz, “Erotics of the Image,” *Art Papers* 18 (November/December 1994): 19.

<sup>87</sup> See Figs. 15-18.

<sup>88</sup> See Fig. 12.

<sup>89</sup> Bertillon began his research on criminal composites in 1879; however, the French police force did not officially adopt the system until 1888. Galton’s criminal composite studies, c.1890s, were largely based on Bertillon’s system.

Subjects are framed within a bare, shallow composition, a device that Opie picks up with her brilliant yellow backdrops. Using the format of a typological composition, Opie identifies lesbians in much the same manner that popular society has branded them – as criminals, a situation that is indirectly parodied in Opie’s images since they steal the attributes of masculinity.<sup>90</sup> Opie exaggerates this connection by identifying each lesbian subject with a gang persona—“Chicken,” “Pig Pen,” “Papa Bear,” “Chief” and “Bo” (Opie’s alter ego) are some examples.

The focal axis of the face, the shallow composition, and the centrality of the subject within the frame are photographic codes shared by both Opie’s images and nineteenth century typologies. The theatricality of each image borrows from typological compositions as well. Similar to ways in which medical images of the insane type were manipulated via props and gesture, Opie controls the expressions and interpretations of her lesbian subjects with costume and posture.<sup>91</sup> However, Opie heightens the theatricality of her images to a level of absurdity, thereby transforming her images into parodies. The falseness of these photographs is immediately understood by the viewer. Opie explains,

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<sup>90</sup> Until 1960, every US state had an anti-sodomy law, which prohibited oral and anal sex between same-sex couples and thereby charged lesbians and gays as criminals. It wasn’t until 2003 that the Supreme Court overturned such laws.

<sup>91</sup> See Fig. 14. Note that photographic portraits until the late nineteenth century required the model to remain still for an extended period of time. These images depicting extreme facial gestures would have to be “held” by the subject in order for the camera to capture the image without blurring. Therefore, the photographs were not documenting an ostensibly natural phenomenon of insane facial expressions.

This group of photographs plays with portrait photography conventions in picturing a particular subculture of gender-benders.... At first glance one is convinced that they are facing the stare of a man, but upon looking into the photographs one can see the webbing of the mustaches and drips of glue. The photographs were all taken with a 4 x 5 camera so the detail of the false is emphasized. It is the disruptiveness and falseness of the images which explores the extent of invisibility of the lesbian community and queer culture.<sup>92</sup>

Historically, gay individuals have been falsely perceived as transgendered; however, it is entirely possible, and most times probable, that lesbians do not want to continuously *be* masculine or sexually male.<sup>93</sup> Adhering to traditional unitary gender codes, society has created “false universals of man” which may or may not be representative of his category. As a result, the universal of the lesbian has falsely become the counterpart of the extreme masculine man. The reality is that the stereotype of the mannish lesbian is an illusion, therefore is not a constant truth. Catherine Opie’s photographs confront the falseness and absurdity of this stereotype. Describing the females in her portraits, she explains,

These women are heavily pierced and tattooed lesbians from the alternative club scene who are into challenging the typical image of lesbians...They don’t want to

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<sup>92</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 152.

<sup>93</sup> Transgendered is defined as the sustained change of a person’s gender through non-surgical means.

be men or to pass as men all the time. They just want to borrow male fantasies and play with them.<sup>94</sup>

The exaggerated presence of mustaches and beards in Opie's portraits at first glance portray the subjects' gender identity. The viewer preconceives each subject's identity through an assumption and interpellation of her signifying codes of sexual orientation. However, while the women in each photograph obviously mimic the attributes of masculinity, they do not do it out of aspiration to *become* male. These lesbians do not aspire to such levels of masculinity; they wish instead merely to borrow these masculine attributes, perhaps occasionally play with them as Opie indicates. Sporting fake mustaches, these women reveal no desire to convince the viewer that they *are* male, but instead, mock society's reliance on binary gender performance.<sup>95</sup> The humor associated with the portraits, combined with the obsessive attention to detail, translates into serious statements concerning the absurdity of the common stereotype of the mannish lesbian.

Opie's humorous manipulations of these traditionally typological compositions urge viewers to query the various ways in which photographers decide which subjects to photograph and how to frame these subjects. Ultimately, a photographer's creative intentions are shaped by the social discourse in which he or she may live. Opie demonstrates how the traditionally assumed "truth" that is depicted by a documentary photograph is easily manipulated. The falseness of these images questions the discourse

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<sup>94</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 150.

<sup>95</sup> Critic Kim Fullerton believes that the reliance on binary gender models is a strategy of survival within the compulsory systems of gender hierarchy and heterosexuality. Fullerton, "The Daddy," 4.

of documentary photography and physiognomic approaches to gathering knowledge. She thereby challenges conventional perceptions created by our attachment to fixed ways of looking that heretofore have lead to blind spots. By appropriating a history of negative humor (the stereotype of the mannish lesbian) to comment on its absurd and malicious nature, she has facilitated the disarmament of this stereotype's oppressive effects.

### The Pervert and the Dyke: the Portrait Series

One of Opie's most powerful, and disturbing, portraits is *Pervert* (1994).<sup>96</sup> In this self-portrait belonging to her *Portrait Series*, she etches the word "Pervert" onto her chest, thereby expressing herself through the label often attached to queer individuals by mainstream society. She takes pride in the label, written elaborately in her own "royal" blood, backdropped by lavish gold and black cloth. A row of pins has been inserted through the flesh of both arms, and her face is bound by a leather mask. By donning a mask, Opie opens to debate the assumption that one cannot be completely exposed while the face is hidden, a notion perpetuated since the nineteenth century. According to physiognomic law, the face is the window through which several inner workings, such as behavior and intention, can be accessed. A subject can be identified as criminal, insane, ethnic or homosexual simply by reading his or her facial features. The mask amplifies the immediate collapse of identity because the face is unavailable for scrutiny. Opie is

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<sup>96</sup> See Fig. 19.

again manipulating the traditional codes of typological portraiture by framing her portrait in a manner that denies the viewer access to her face. Maintaining the essence of medical typologies, she provides the viewer with a caption that identifies the subject. However, contrary to Barthesian philosophy, which claims that the meanings of photographs are often fixed by text or captions, Opie's text, "Pervert," contributes to the uncertainty of the subject's identity and subjective nature of the viewer's gaze. *Pervert* assaults the viewer with its direct and shocking presence. The delivered text is powerful and controversial because it is a word that signifies a subject that is "disgusting" and, at times, criminal. Commenting on this portrait, Opie explained that she is interested in documenting the "impact of such social and spatial connections and disjunctions."<sup>97</sup> *Pervert* explores the word "Pervert" and the reaction to it, while simultaneously commenting on the connection or possible disjunction between the sign "Pervert" and its signified.

Two other examples similar to *Pervert* are *Dyke (1992)*, and *Self-Portrait(1993)*, both created as part of the *Portrait Series*.<sup>98</sup> Both works portray a young woman turned away from the viewer, only revealing her perceived label of identity. In the first, "Dyke" is tattooed elaborately across the back of her neck. The second, Opie's self portrait, displays a drawing of two stick figure women holding hands in front of a house. The image has been scratched into the skin of the artist's back in a child-like style. Similar to *Dyke*, this self-portrait displays an image written in a style of communication familiar to

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<sup>97</sup> Gaines, "Opie's Opus," 52.

<sup>98</sup> See Figs. 20, 21.

our society, a language developed by children often before harsh realities of semiotic metaphors are learned. Again, Opie has appropriated the typological composition with the shallow background and centrality of the subject; however, similar to *Pervert*, she has once again provided a twist to the traditional composition—the denial of the facial axis.

While the self-portrait displays a dream-like image belonging to the artist, *Dyke* portrays a label which has been inscribed upon her body, forced by the society in which she lives. The inevitable shortcomings of the word “dyke” that accompany its production demonstrate the fallible nature of our current discourses on gender, identity and expression. In no way is it possible to learn more about these individuals simply by studying their portraits and attempting to *read* their bodies as text. Contrary to physiognomic law, the invisible cannot be made visible simply by inscribing a word or image across the body. *Pervert, Dyke and Self-Portrait* force the viewer to question how society reads bodies and identities while simultaneously allowing the viewer to explore the various ways in which individuals attempt to express themselves.

### Cross-dressing and Re-dressing

While many of the remaining images in the *Portrait Series* follow traditional typological compositions, these images can also be interpreted as portraits.<sup>99</sup> For

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<sup>99</sup> Many of photographs in the *Portrait Series* follow the typological codes of shallow space, full frontal bodies, central axis of facial identification and theatrical manipulation of gesture, costume and pose; however, unlike her earlier series, several of these images play less with photographic compositions, but instead remain focused on the exploration of the performative function of clothing and appearance.

example, several images seemingly allow the subject to own his or her identity, thereby defining the image as a portrait. These images feature subjects in *natural* poses, offering evidence of the power of leisure and expression. On the other hand, it can be argued that these subjects are first and foremost classified as “other,” therefore their identity has already been constructed carefully by society. The power of self-expression is not awarded to these individuals; therefore, the ability for their images to be framed as portraits is forever denied. Conversely, the sexual ambiguity of many of these images results in an escape from the eternal typological frame. Without knowing the image as “other,” the subject is free to participate within “normal” society and his or her image is able to become a portrait rather than a typology. Besides subscribing to ambiguity, many subjects also attain freedom from the typological frame by changing the ways in which society and the viewer defines “other”. When a group of individuals belonging to a traditional “other” community advocates change in their society, thereby attaining equal status among the realm of the “normal,” that group may have reinterpreted how they are read by society. Escaping the realm of the other allows those individuals to frame themselves outside the typological composition.

In her *Portrait Series*, Opie has reinterpreted the traditional portrait, employing it as a political weapon in her attempt to change viewers’ perceptions about the gay community. The spectacular color and incredible detail of the portraits, all chromogenic color prints, create an image that pops out of the shallow composition into an immediate foreground, confronting the viewer with an “in your face” resonance, thus forcing the

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*Portrait Series* is a documentary of the various ways queer individuals alter their bodies to express their sexuality.

viewer to confront “the other.” In turn, she admits to the vulnerability she has subjected these persons to by pushing them forward for all to gaze upon.<sup>100</sup> The subculture of the Los Angeles leather community, when noticed, is often gawked at by mainstream society because of their awkward appearances. By identifying this same group as worthy of portraiture, a genre most often used to immortalize the rich and the aristocratic, the noteworthy, and the meritorious, Opie attempts to demand respect for those portrayed. Ironically, she often refers to her subjects as her “royal family.”<sup>101</sup> The respect she demands from the audience challenges any discriminatory stereotypes and prejudices they may have bought to the viewing. During this confrontation, the audience is forced to reassess their prejudices, leading to questions they may ask about their own beliefs, the life of the individual photographed and the intentions and relations of the photographer. By forcing the viewer to question the situation, Opie again shatters the commonly held notion of “image as truth.”

Unlike her earlier series, Opie’s *Portrait Series* does not offer text or misleading captions to identify her subjects. When questioned about withholding information about the individual’s sex or gender, she responds that such information would pathologize the individuals in her portraits. She doesn’t add *man, woman, lesbian, femme, butch*, etc., to the titles because the importance is that “the people are just who they are in the picture.”<sup>102</sup> While this may lead to misinterpretation or failed communication between the viewer and the subject, it continues to foster a series of questions and reassessments.

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<sup>100</sup> Reilly, “Drive to Describe,” 91.

<sup>101</sup> Ferguson, “How I Think,” 45.

<sup>102</sup> Reilly, “Drive to Describe,” 91.

These portraits include several images of women dressed as men; however, the sex or sexual orientation of the individual is often unclear. It is unknown whether these persons are transgendered or transsexual, or if they are merely adopting gender roles temporarily.<sup>103</sup> Some of the women seem to be costumed, whereas others are obviously dressed in a manner that is more natural by societal standards. Portraits similar to *Angela Scheirl* (1993) portray a subject whose sex is ambiguous.<sup>104</sup> In this image, the subject is dressed in a man's suit, seated in masculine pose and dons a masculine hairstyle. Some viewers may not interpret Angela as a lesbian, transsexual or transgender because they are unaware that she is not naturally a man.

Another portrait, *Mike and Sky*, presents two women who have undergone hormone replacement therapy, thereby biologically (but not surgically) transforming themselves into men, rather than merely performing as male.<sup>105</sup> Mike and Sky are similar to lesbians in that their presence critiques gender and sexual normativity. Offering only their names Opie withholds the fact that the two figures are hormonally altered female to male (FTM) transgendered. This particular print *appears* to be a portrait of two men. One subject placed closely behind the other, they are perceived as two homosexual men.

This portrait crops the two figures at the bust, focusing on the faces. Dressed in muscle shirts, unshaven and tattooed, the individuals address their masculinity to the viewers. Recognizing the individuals as behaving outside society's construct of

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<sup>103</sup> A transsexual is a person who permanently alters his or her sexual organs through surgical means.

<sup>104</sup> See Fig. 22.

<sup>105</sup> See Fig. 23.

“normal,” the audience identifies the pair as members of a deviant culture. Colorful tattoos of flowers, dolphins and symbols derived from Native American mysticism streaming down the biceps of both are notable. The three ear piercings and the traditional biker bandana also mark the supposed identity of the subjects.

Opie has staged the two individuals in front of a solid electric blue backdrop, highlighting the incredibly sharp colors and shapes of the composition. As a result, the two figures pop into the immediate foreground of the shallow compositional space. The dramatic close proximity of the figures and their confident gaze, pronounced by an arched brow may make a scornful viewer uneasy. To the unobservant eye, the two individuals, through hormones, have convincingly transformed their appearance; however, their presence in a Catherine Opie portrait immediately sparks doubt about their “true” sexual nature in the viewers’ minds. Opie displays their appearance in a straightforward manner, as naturally as a member of “normal” society would be displayed. While commenting on the various signifiers an individual may choose to display as an expression of his or her perceived gendered identity, Opie also proclaims to the public that for some, such choices and desires are *natural*. Mike and Sky refer to themselves as both lesbians and men.<sup>106</sup> When viewers are prepared, and able, to step outside the limitations of traditional current gender discourse, they can then accept this paradox.

Other portraits including *Renee* (1994) and *Bo* (1994) subject women who are merely costumed in traditionally male clothing rather than adopting a *sustained*

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<sup>106</sup> Samaras, “Feminism, Photography,” 92.

alteration of their gender character.<sup>107</sup> Portraying the categorical “other,” both photographs are composed in the typologically traditional shallow and flat space with an emphasis on the centrality of the figure and facial axis. As discussed earlier, Opie’s interest in the performative function of clothing is historically grounded. She is quite aware of the history of cross-dressing from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries when an acceptance of the performative function of clothing and its control over identity through the use of costume was particularly widespread. This collective critique of the expressive function of costume exemplifies the historical presence of self-expression and identity experimentation. Historian Susan Gubar wrote, “Cross-dressing becomes a way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity.”<sup>108</sup> Catherine Opie tests the categories of gender identity via an exploration of personal experimentation with costume and dress.

Opie’s portraits *Bo* and *Renee* are examples of her explorations of costume. When is a costume merely a costume, and when does it become a person’s comfortable dress? This question is never answered by Opie, but is instead asked of the viewer. *Bo* and *Renee* are dressed in traditional male costume. *Bo* sports a buzz hair cut, a false mustache, a sleeveless plaid shirt, a club-like object hanging from a back belt, and oversized work boots. The figure stands with thumbs tucked into two front pockets in a masculine manner. The eyes stare directly at the viewer. Knowing the figure pictured is

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<sup>107</sup> See Figs. 24, 25.

<sup>108</sup> Susan Gubar, “Blessings in Disguise: Cross Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists,” *Massachusetts Review*, Autumn 1981, 447, quoted in Susan Fillin-Yeh, “Dandies, Marginality and Modernism: Georgia O’Keefe, Marcel Duchamp and Other Cross-dressers,” *Oxford Art Journal* 18, no. 2 (1995): 36.

Opie, therefore knowing she is a lesbian, the viewer is unable to assess the degree to which the figure is involved in the art of self-presentation or in theatricality. Stereotyped as occupying a masculine state of being, the lesbian is rarely viewed as merely “theatrically” performing a masculine manner of attire. She is instead immediately perceived as *being* male, aside from the obvious fact that the mustache is fake and the costume is extreme in terms of traditional male attire.

A more complicated image is that of Renee, a young black woman posing in a sailor’s uniform. She stands full frontal, centered within a shallow frame. She holds her hands behind her back as she stiffly stands with legs parted. Wearing a uniform, it is difficult to decide whether she is dressed as a professional, or if she is instead using costume as a performative exploration of gender. Like Bo, Mike, Sky and Angela, Renee forces the viewer to question the limits of sexual and gender categories, blurring their boundaries, thereby shattering conventional rules of being. Each image manipulates preconceptions and stereotypical expression through a critical appropriation of familiar codes of costume and composition; thereby highlighting the arbitrary nature of pseudo-scientific truths regarding gender identity.

## CONCLUSION

The individuals pictured in Opie's portraits have been the subject of prejudice and discrimination partially because they do not fit comfortably into one of the two categories of gender that society has implemented. As a result, they are considered abnormal. The individuals have attempted to communicate their sense of themselves through experimental languages including body art, piercing, and costume. The result is a body now visually abnormal, calling attention to their categorized otherness. Communities, whether black, white, gay, or Jewish, are often defined through codes of dress, attitude and the body itself.<sup>109</sup> Ironically, it is society that has forced codes of appearance upon these communities, in turn scolding them for imitating those models. The majority of queer individuals have come to recognize themselves in "the impersonal, medical descriptions of the sexologists" and have taken on these sexual identities as their own.<sup>110</sup> Once such individuals have established themselves as deviants, persons outside the norm, their only options for identity are those that society has created—if a woman has declared herself as a lesbian, she is immediately expected to perform a very specific role as "dyke." She is thereby expected to manipulate her body and behavior within the dominant masculine role that society has accorded. These constricting models of

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<sup>109</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 152.

<sup>110</sup> Nayland Bland and Lawrence Doan, *In a Different Light* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1995), 2.

identity and gender have restricted personal expression. When subscribing to one gender or the other, ignoring the option to create a more fluid gender identity, one remains unsatisfied because the communication of his or her identity is often never fulfilled. One aspect of an individual's identity will never be acknowledged if he or she ignores any personality that is not in accord with the one sexual character he or she is expected to perform. The cycle is inescapable. By forcing the myth of the masculine lesbian upon all of lesbian society, many are pressured to adopt extreme measures in order to fulfill society's expectations. Because it is commonly held that feminine conflicts with masculine, lesbians (as the masculine equivalent) are often forced to deny any behavior that is feminine. Such oppression could be avoided if gender fluidity were permissible, thus allowing unlimited possibilities of identity expressions. Opie's desire for fluidity comes from her understanding of postmodern thought. As Deleuze and Guattari advocate,

Form rhizomes and not roots...Be neither a One nor a Many, but multiples!

Form a line, never a point! A rhizome doesn't begin and doesn't end, but is

always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*.<sup>111</sup>

Society has irrationally fabricated sexual character as a constant and stable point that should instead be performed as a system of interconnected lines. One can enter a line at any degree, can move freely upon it, and can cross onto other lines simultaneously.

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<sup>111</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1997), 8.

Judith Butler once claimed that though it is impossible to express the [lesbian identity], it is possible to express the experiences of being [lesbian].<sup>112</sup> Opie's recent series of portraiture, *Domestic*, demonstrates the success of this theory.<sup>113</sup> These portraits are in contrast to her earlier work, offering instead a more serious, less sarcastic agenda. *Domestic* is a series of snapshot portraits of American lesbian households, accompanied by photographic still-lives of their everyday surroundings. Once again, she is representing individuals and their communities. These images exhibit a rich natural light unlike her earlier portraits that softens the initial shock a viewer may experience when confronting an atypical representation of a family unit, which differs from her earlier works. The ease of viewing these photographs allows the viewer to acknowledge the similarities among all types of families—love, companionship, responsibility, commitment, etc. The roles each member assumes are unlimited. Opie stated, "This isn't about trying to be normal—the feel-good, happy lesbian couple together—it just is."<sup>114</sup> While the traditional heterosexual model may work for some homosexual households, society must acknowledge the possibility that any number of combined roles are also possible. Two women can live together without one being male and one female, they both just *are*. Opie retains her sense of absurdity and humor in a subtle manner in her *Domestic* series. She enjoys showing the photograph of the washer and dryer stating,

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<sup>112</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 530-531.

<sup>113</sup> See Fig. 26.

<sup>114</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art*, 153.

“that’s a lesbian washer and dryer,” while the audience laughs.<sup>115</sup> This is precisely the point; the idea that a lesbian washer is any different from a straight washer is ridiculous. Transferably, the essential difference between a lesbian person and a straight person is equally as absurd.

*Domestic* is a response to the new political issues surrounding gay and lesbian rights, marriage, adoption rights, and custody battles being fought by queer individuals today. Like most queer photography of the late eighties and nineties, Opie’s work, while aesthetically unique and artistically skilled, can also be seen as intentionally instrumental in postmodern gay and lesbian movements. She had stated, “I think that I have changed a lot of people’s minds about this group of people.”<sup>116</sup> Her efforts have been to document the multiple possibilities of control over one’s gender characteristics in order to confront viewers with various identities and self-assured personas. Her portraits challenge sexual boundaries, demolishing preconceived stereotypes and prejudices, while advocating gender multiplicity and a postmodern model of diverse gender fluidity. By representing this community through portraiture, Opie believes that mainstream society will come to understand these individuals after “reading” the symbolic expressions of their true inner beings communicated through various bodily experimentations. Opie proclaims herself a political artist.<sup>117</sup> She recognizes the power that photography possesses and subsequently uses that power as a political weapon to comment on a variety of histories that have today become naturalized, including

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<sup>115</sup> Ferguson, “How I Think,” 49. See Fig. 27.

<sup>116</sup> Ferguson, “How I Think,” 45.

<sup>117</sup> Reilly, “Drive to Describe,” 95.

specifically sexuality and the field of documentary photography. She thereby institutes political and cultural change in advocating that the visible image of body and face do not allow interpolation to one's inner being. Seeing does not equal knowing when what is being seen has been historically fabricated and manipulated.

Catherine Opie is not working within a gay sensibility of art history—she does not assume a way of making art that is lesbian. She instead makes art within a broad discourse of historically recognizable codes of photographic portraiture. She adopts a formal language people understand. The beauty associated with her works is an intentional hook. Her disruption of codes of representation is intrinsically postmodern. Her further application of humor, sarcasm, and parody drive her agenda to highlight the unstable and fallible nature of gender identity and lesbian stereotype.

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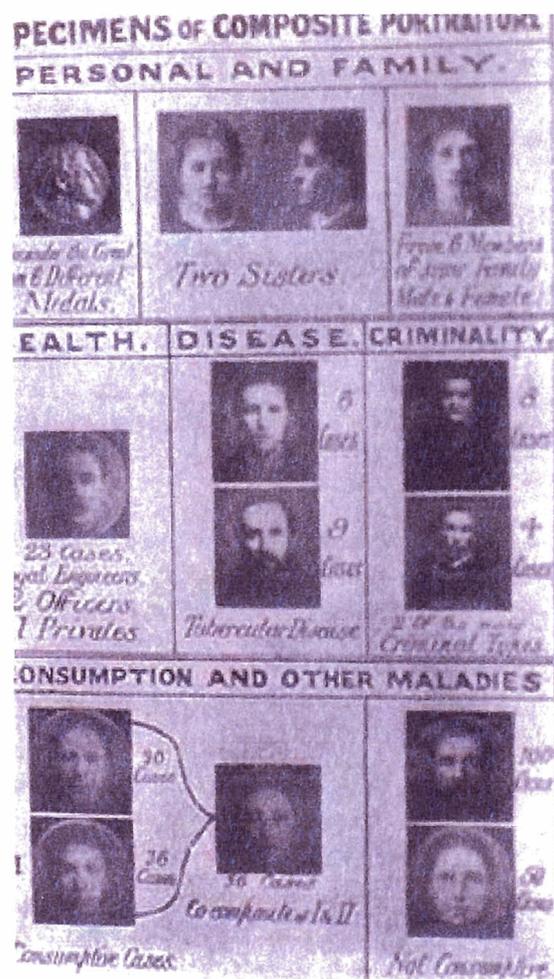
FIGURES



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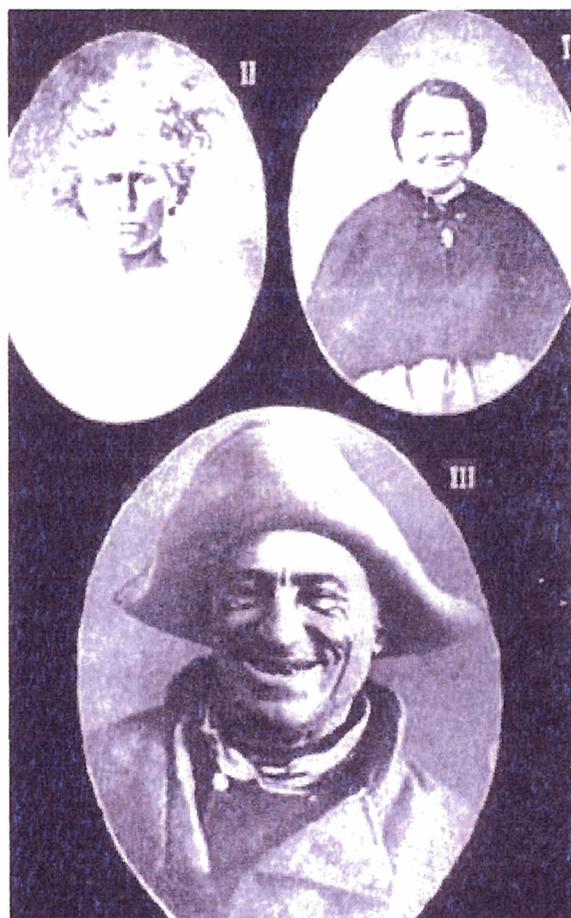
**Figure 1**

Sir William Jackson Hooker  
photographed by Maull and Polyblank,  
late 1850s. Albumen Print. National  
Portrait Gallery, London.



**Figure 2**

Frontispiece from Francis Galton,  
*Inquiries into Human Faculty*, 1893.



**Figure 3**

Three Cases of mania from Henri Dagonet's "Nouveau traité élémentaire et pratique des maladies mentales," 1876. Oskar Diethelm Historical Library, Cornell.



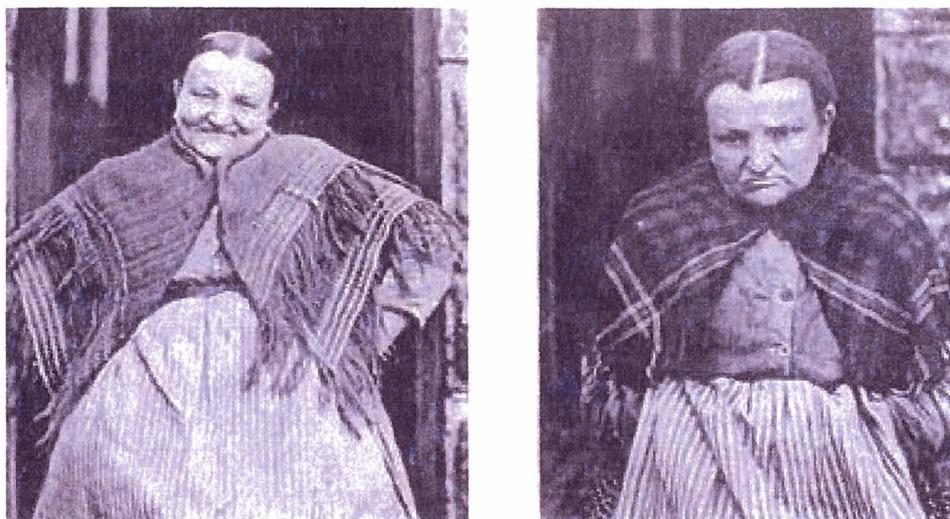
**Figure 4**

A photolithograph from the original of Hugh Diamond's portrait of "chronic mania," 1874. Oskar Diethelm Historical Library, Cornell.



**Figure 5**

Three studies of “megalomania” from Dagonet, 1876. Oskar Diethelm Historical Library, Cornell.



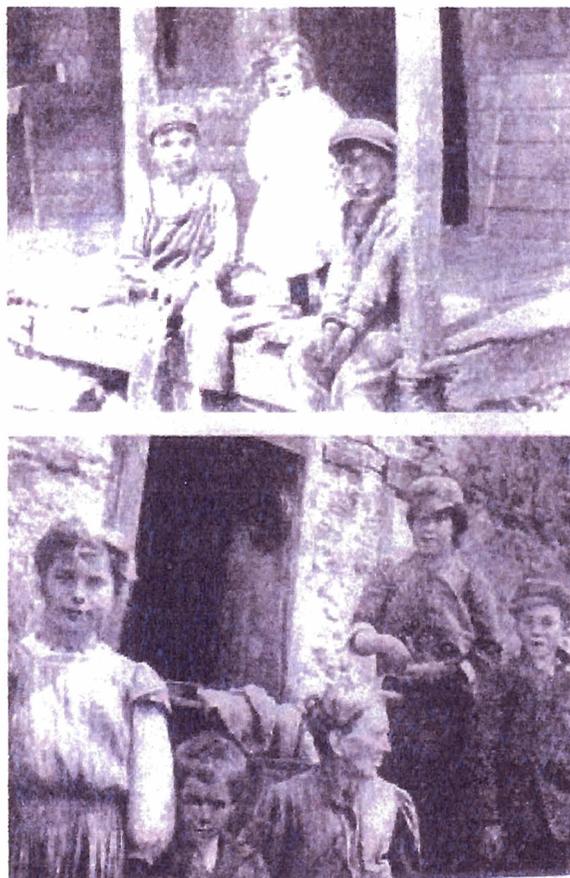
**Figure 6**

Photographs of a patient suffering from bipolar depression, in the manic state on the left, in the melancholic state on the right, from Theodor Ziehen's "Psychiatrie für Ärzte und Studierende bearbeitet," 1894. Oskar Diethelm Historical Library.



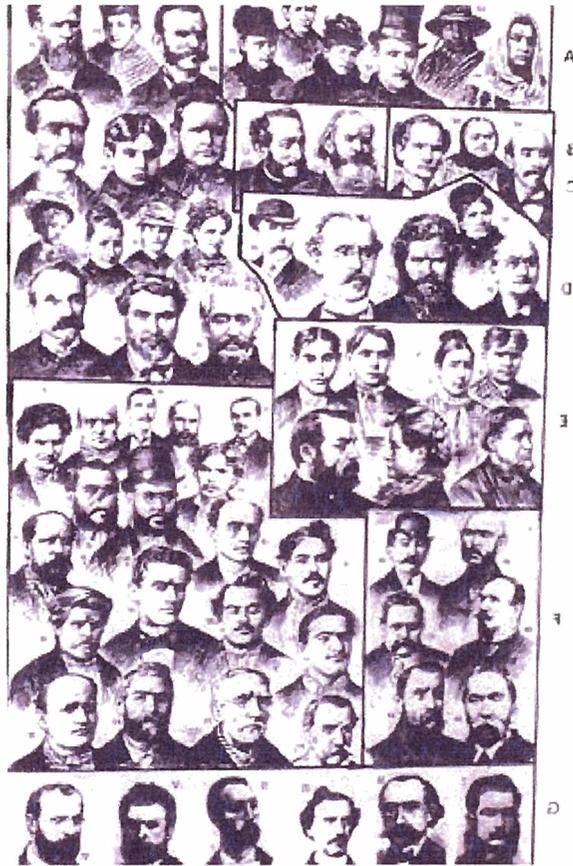
**Figure 7**

Photograph depicting a case of "Imbecility"  
by Sir James Crichton Browne, 1869.  
Cambridge University Library.



**Figure 8**

Altered photographs of members of the Kallikak family living in poverty in the New Jersey pine barrens, by HH Goddard, 1912. Published originally in Goddard's *The Kallikak family, a study in the heredity of feeble-mindedness*. New York: Macmillan, 121.



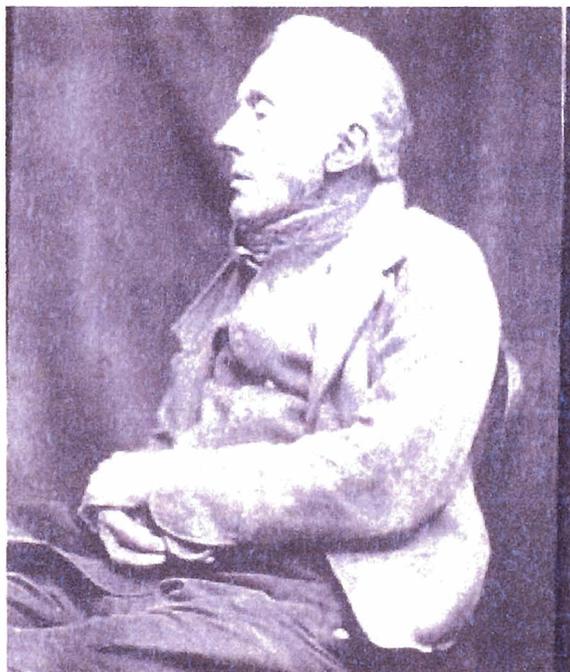
**Figure 9**

A panoply of criminal faces. The frontispiece to the atlas of C. Lombroso's *Criminal Man*. Paris: F. Alcan, 1887, 682.



**Figure 10**

Photograph of Isma Martin, an identified criminal, late nineteenth century. Bain Collection, Library of Congress.



**Figure 11**

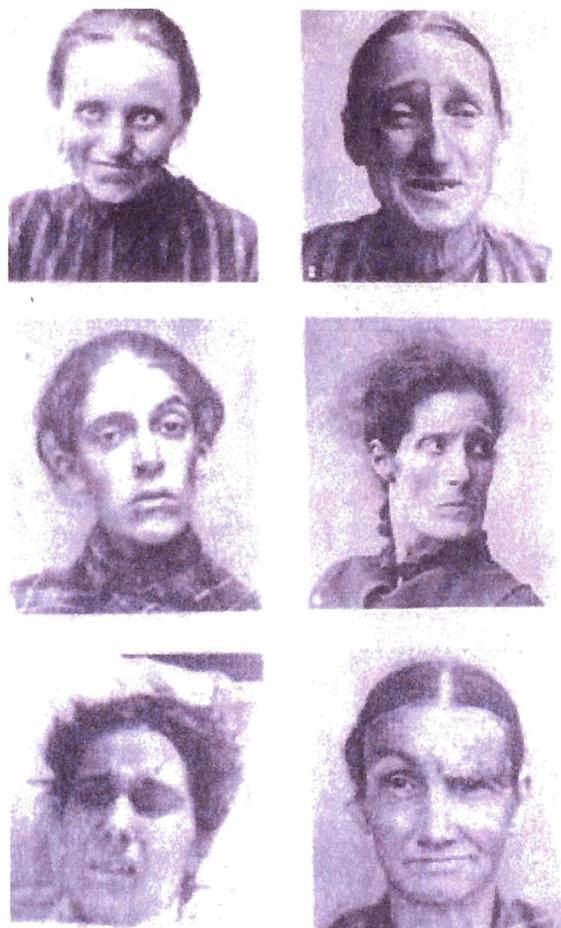
Hugh W. Diamond's photograph of a case of senile dementia, c. 1856. Wellcome Historical Library, London.





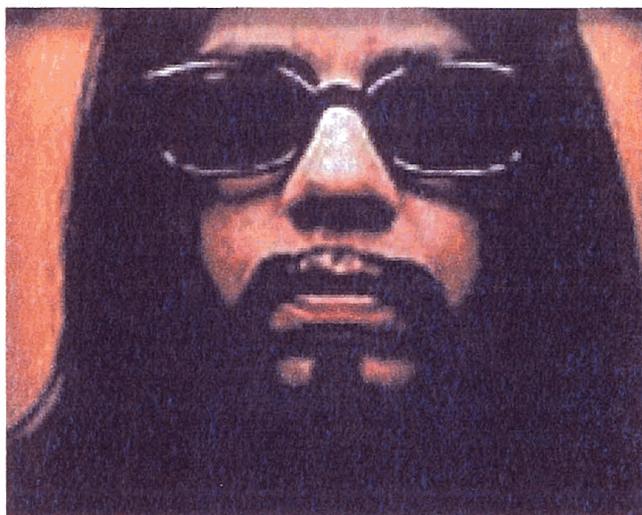
**Figure 13**

Illustration of “Madness with epilepsy,” from Max Leidesdorf’s *Textbook on Psychiatric Illness*. Erkangen: Ferdinand Enke, 1865. Oskar Diethelm Historical Library, Cornell.



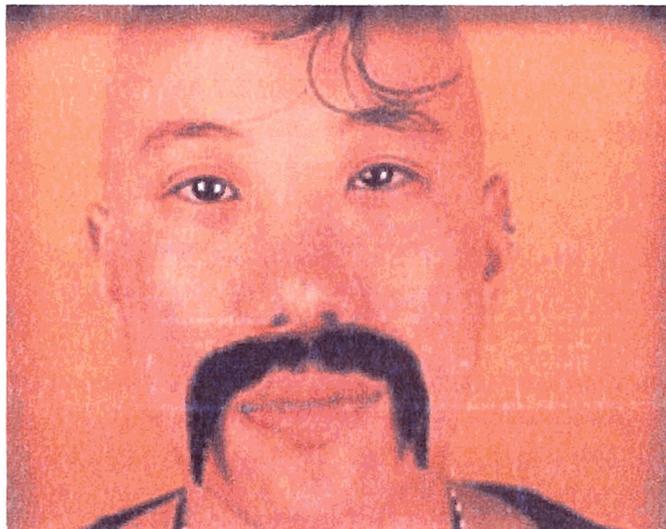
**Figure 14**

An illustration accompanying John Turner's essay on the faces of the insane in *The Journal of Mental Science*, January, 1892. Oskar Diethelm Historical Library, Cornell.



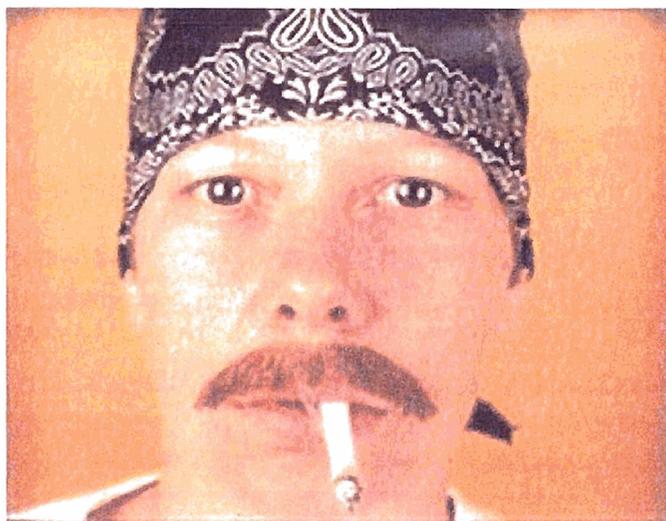
**Figure 15**

Catherine Opie. "Oso Bad," 1991. Chromogenic Print. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



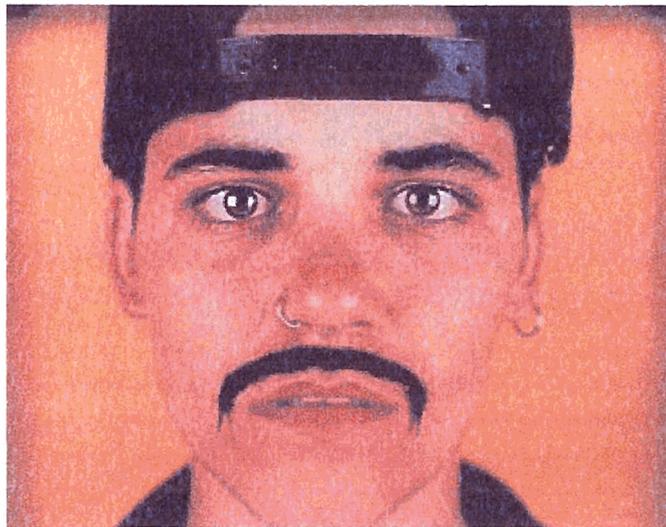
**Figure 16**

Catherine Opie. "Ingin," 1991. Chromogenic Print.  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



**Figure 17**

Catherine Opie. "Chief," 1991. Chromogenic Print.  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



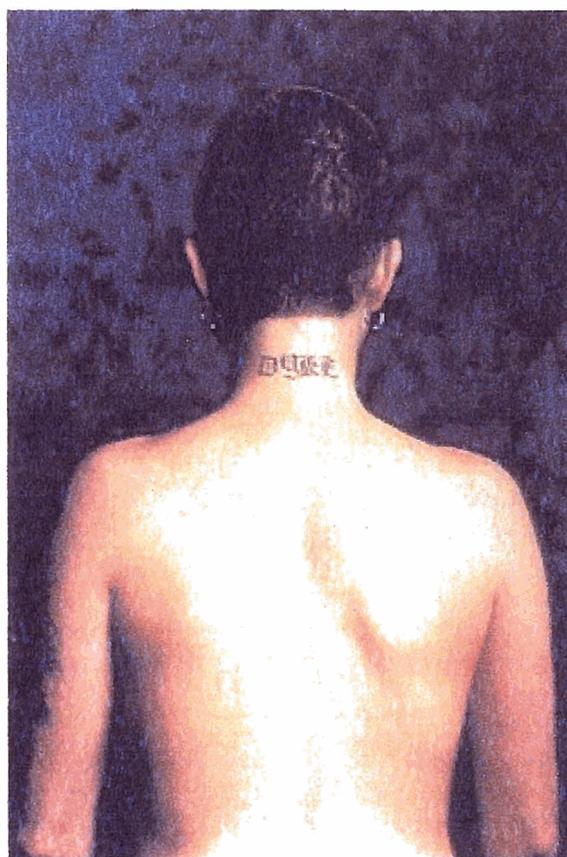
**Figure 18**

Catherine Opie. "Whitey," 1991. Chromogenic Print.  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



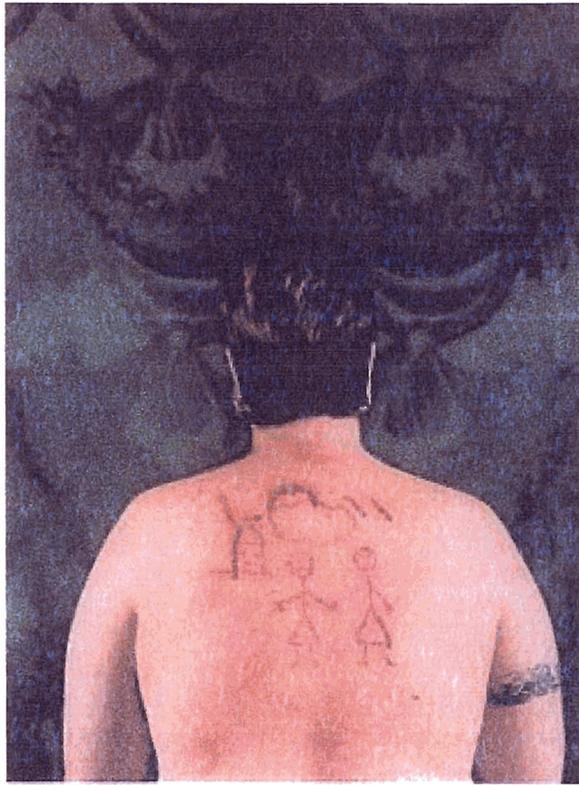
**Figure 19**

Catherine Opie. "Pervert," 1994.  
Chromogenic Print. Regen Projects, Los  
Angeles.



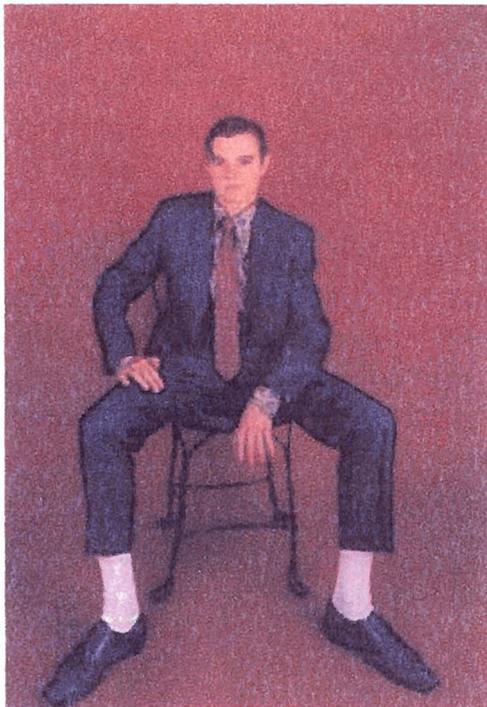
**Figure 20**

Catherine Opie. "Dyke," 1992. Chromogenic Print. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



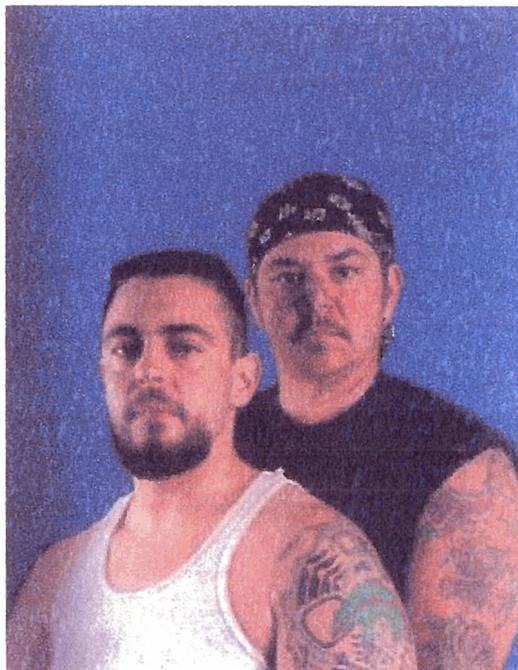
**Figure 21**

Catherine Opie. "Self-Portrait," 1993. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



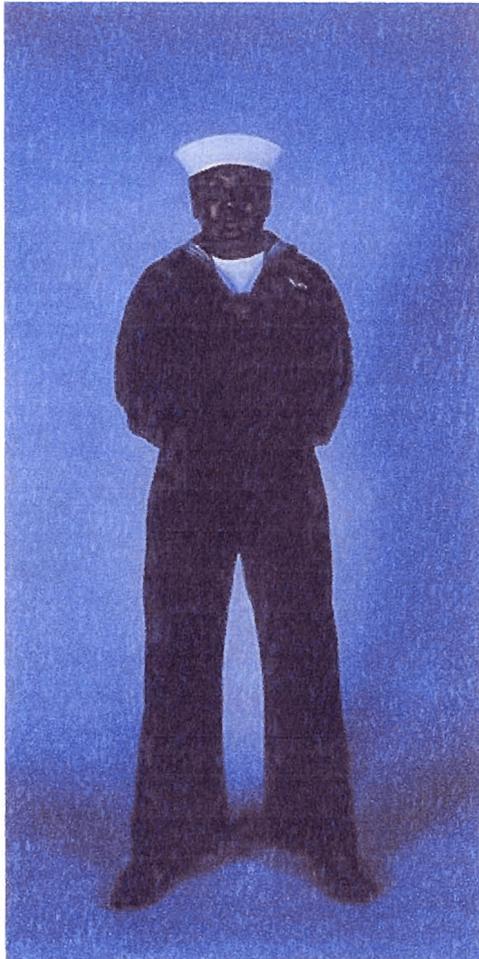
**Figure 22**

Catherine Opie. "Angela Scheirl,"  
1993. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



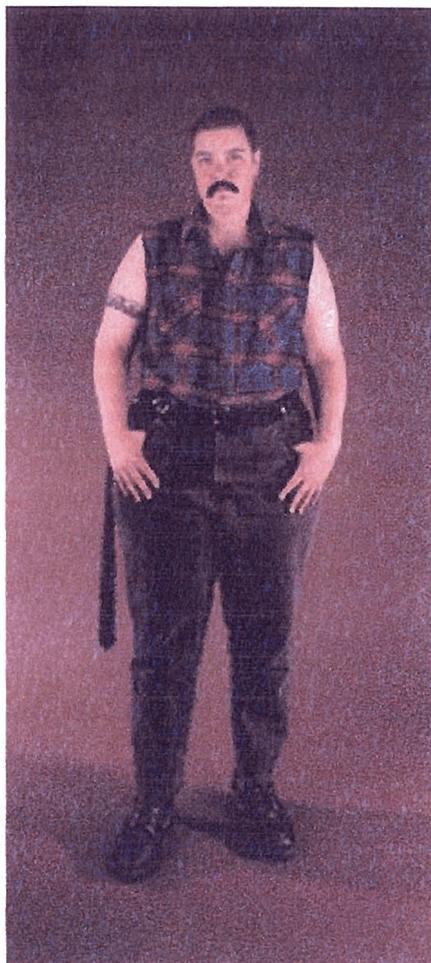
**Figure 23**

Catherine Opie. "Mike and Sky," 1993.  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



**Figure 24**

Catherine Opie. "Renee," 1994.  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



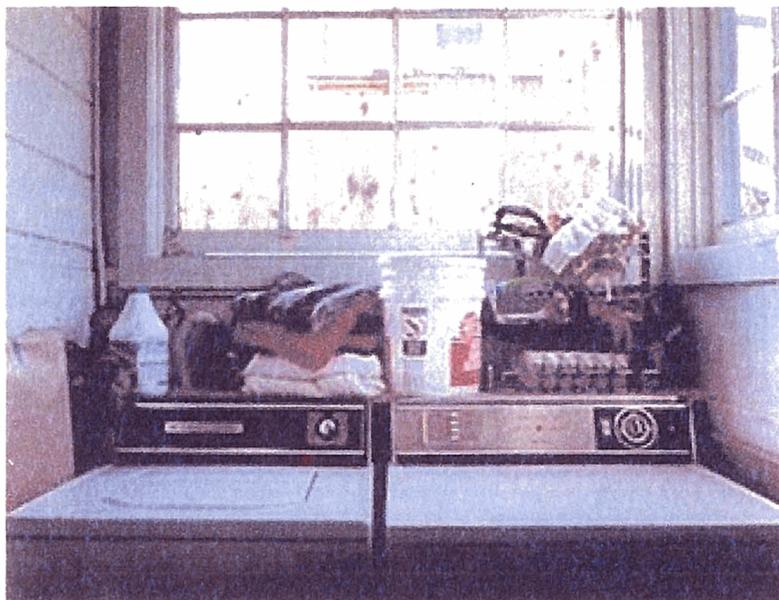
**Figure 25**

Catherine Opie. "bo," 1994.  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



**Figure 26**

Catherine Opie. "Catherine, Melanie and Sadie Rain, New York," 1998. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



**Figure 27**

Catherine Opie. "Still Life #2, San Francisco, California,"  
1998. Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

VITA

## VITA

Jennifer Tobitha Bridges was born July 25, 1979, in Bethesda, Maryland and is an American citizen. She graduated from Beaufort High School, Beaufort, South Carolina in 1997. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Wofford College, Spartanburg, South Carolina in 2001 where she studied sociology and art history. While pursuing her master's degree, she operated Artspace, a non-profit contemporary art gallery in Richmond, Virginia.