

Catherine Opie

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Regen Projects, Los Angeles
23 February – 29 March

How could one not be intrigued by Jonathan Franzen's appearance in Catherine Opie's new series of photographs? The writer sits, in lost profile, absorbed by Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), which is soaked in a bath of light. Franzen is a secondary concern in the photograph. In this instance, he is less capable of being 'known' than the pages of the book, to which he is a servant. He waits, on the fringes of the light and mostly out of view, for the book to reveal its secrets – he appears to believe it is a proper vessel of enlightenment.

Opie, like Franzen, neither shies away from nor is enraptured by the trappings of irony and distance, but she nevertheless believes that realism, when employed with rigour and sensitivity, is an essential window to who we are right now. Whether in photographs of the sinuous lines of Los Angeles freeways, close family or a tight-knit S/M community that relies most of all on the trust its members have in each other, Opie is one of the foremost traditional photographers in America.

Her new show flickers back and forth between photography's capacity for great doubt over its status as a conveyer of humanistic depth and its concomitant unapologetic embrace of that depth. Each wall of the Regen presentation contains an untitled landscape, which is distorted and rendered out of focus, and surrounded by subtly lit portraits against velvet backdrops. Great distances resolve into focus in two ways: first, through a manipulation of the mechanism of photography itself; second, through the human connection between Opie and her subject. The show, at its often-dark heart, is balanced between sustained mystery and intimacy.

The story is that this body of work grew out of Opie's encounters in London with Gerhard Richter's Tate Modern retrospective and the National Gallery's show of Leonardo da Vinci. Opie's show fully embodies both Leonardo's exuberant belief that he could discover humanity's essence through science and representation, and Richter's sober doubts, figured in work that exemplifies how horrible memories outrun our capacity to represent them.

It would be pat to say that Opie just engages this duality by presenting simple Richter-esque blurs next to her portraits; instead, she really wants the genuine fire of doubt, and she wants it to animate and charge her straight-ahead realism.

The portraits in the show – some of longtime subjects such as a woman named Idexa or Opie's son, Oliver – emerge out of various states of shadow, as if each sitter's character is appearing out of a bath of photographic solution and coming forward into the soft light of Opie's gaze. She loves these people. Her moves with the camera are attuned and subtle. She watches and waits for her subjects to find themselves in the camera, and she waits to find them and be surprised by them. One assumes that the still life *Stump Fire #1* (2012) is what Opie seeks: that moment when her subjects burst into the flame of their own internal light, and when photography becomes keeper of the fire.

ED SCHAD

Marjane Satrapi

Marjane Satrapi: Peintures
Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris
30 January – 23 March

A much-publicised introduction to the contemporary art market after the critical and commercial success of her autobiographical graphic novels *Persepolis* (2000–3) and *Chicken with Plums* (2004) – and their later film adaptations with codirector Vincent Paronnaud, in 2007 and 2011 respectively – Marjane Satrapi's first solo show presents a series of 21 medium-to-small-scale acrylic portraits (all untitled, and dated from 2009 to 2012). Just a week before the early February release in theatres of her third movie, *La Bande des Jotas* (2012), in which she also plays the lead role, all her paintings sold like hotcakes.

Contrasting with the basic black-and-white design of her previous comic strips, which offered a vivid and circumstantiated portrayal of the many family heroes the Iranian-born French artist recollected as a child before and after the 1979 revolution, each of her paintings depicts in

various solid and deep colours one, two or four nameless and close-lipped Persian-looking women caught in the midst of seemingly casual activities. Indeed the very simplified outline of the backgrounds, when not wholly abstracted into Mondrian-like geometric wallpaper, alludes lightly to the domestic sphere (just a cup and a teapot to figure a kitchen, for example, or a book and an armchair to imply a living room).

Although Satrapi confesses that the features of the female characters were drawn after family relatives (her grandmother, her great aunt and their cousins), their identities and feats are not here the topic for discussion, nor is a feminist cause: 'I painted women for the same reasons Modigliani or Gauguin did,' she says in the exhibition catalogue. Therefore, since no speech bubble actually pops up in the canvases to share these ladies' inner thoughts, any thrills must not be expected from one of the renowned author's family anecdotes, but rather found within the compositions themselves.

Satrapi uses pictorial means that superficially resemble Matisse's boldness of colours, or – why not, to blow hot air – Gauguin's *cloisonnism* (his contoured areas of plain colours); either way masters that she mentions with Mondrian and Balthus as great sources of inspiration. Yet it soon appears that the only degree of nuance and possible originality in the otherwise flat colouring of her paintings is that which systematically affects the faces of the mute women and especially highlights the expression of their eyes. Consequently, whether introspective or alert, it is the very direction of their gazes that animates the compositions and stirs one's curiosity.

Within the series, 12 portraits delineate a single woman, six a duo, and three a group of four. In the first case, the characters systematically look out of the corner of their eyes, pointing to the outside of the frame and extending the mystery to unseen scenery. In the second case, the two women give each other a conniving sidelong look. In the third case, which is conceived like a family portrait, eyes never meet: the first woman stares at the second, who stares at the third, who stares at the fourth, who breaks the circle by looking straight out of the canvas, towards the viewer.

In the exhibition catalogue, Satrapi quotes a line of Diderot from his review of the 1763 Paris Salon: 'When writing, should one write everything? When painting, should one paint everything? Please, have the grace to leave something for my imagination to fill.' Let's just agree here that his expressed wish is hard to top.

VIOLAINE BOUTET DE MONVEL

Catherine Opie
Jonathan, 2012, pigment print,
127 x 98 cm. Courtesy the artist
and Regen Projects, Los Angeles



Marjane Satrapi
Untitled, 2012, acrylic on paper
mounted on canvas, 64 x 49 cm.
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Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris