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**Transition:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

**Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn.

A panorama of an empty freeway interchange. In black and white, the on and off ramps jutting out to god knows where. A vivid sun-soaked portrait of a woman and her baby under a tree. A National Guard soldier wiping his eyes with a wet cloth in front of a boarded-up storefront. A tight black-and-white shot of a couple in bondage gear, one on their knees, the other above them, looming. A kid, maybe four years old, helping out with Thanksgiving dinner in his kitchen—a turkey and one of those Trader Joe's pepper grinders in the background. There's a gallery in Hollywood called Regen Projects. Right now, you can see all these photos, side by side. And all the work is by my guest, Catherine Opie.

The show is comprised of works from nearly four decades of her career. Her breakthrough photographs of queer and fetish communities, her street photography in Los Angeles, her portraits of surfers, her friends and families. Opie's photography doesn't fit neatly into one bucket. You probably figured that out. Maybe if I was a museum curator, I could draw a line through it all by talking about her commitment to representation, her allusions to art history, her exploration of sexuality and gender roles. And maybe I could spice it up with some artsy mumbo jumbo words like forms and artistic practice or whatever. But I am not an art curator.

For my money, it's all about the effect her work has on you. It is arresting. You look into the eyes of the subject. You scan the early morning beach dotted with surfers. You observe the medicine cabinet shelves with pain meds and sex toys. You get lost in the image. The show is in Hollywood. It's called *harmony is fraught*. It runs from now through March 3rd. It comes at a time when Opie is looking at what she calls her last chapter. She's in her 60s now. Her marriage of 21 years ended less than a month ago. If you can see the show, you should. Anyway, let's get into it: my conversation with Catherine Opie.

**Transition:** Upbeat piano.

**Jesse Thorn:** Catherine, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

**Catherine Opie:** Oh, thank you for having me here.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you remember what the first picture you ever took was?

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, it's kind of represented in the Feiden book, actually. It's the first self-portrait of me at nine in front of my house in Sandusky, Ohio—with the muscles and the flowered pants with the zipper partially down. Yeah. Uh-huh.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) I feel like there are so many symbolic elements in that picture.

**Catherine Opie:** There really are. It's like definitely a baby butch kind of picture. So, already my identity is imprinted on me, but the flower pants definitely throw it off.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, I wondered if your—if the flower pants were like a compromise between you and your parents where you could wear pants, but they had to have flowers on them.

**Catherine Opie:** I think it was. My mother was very disappointed in me not wearing dresses anymore. I mean, it was really upsetting for her. But she was never the kind of mom that wore makeup or anything. She was a PE teacher. So, I didn't really understand her femininity, because she seemed pretty butch to me as well.

**Jesse Thorn:** What did it mean for you to be butch when you were a kid in, I guess, in the '60s in the Midwest?

**Catherine Opie:** I don't think that there was any language about being butch. It was about being a tomboy. I mean, you were a tomboy. And being a tomboy, for me, meant that most of all my friends were boys in the neighborhood, and I wanted exactly what they had. And the girls were playing with Barbies and their little houses. And there was one friend I had that I loved, because she had a fake grocery store and her business with all the little fake packaged food. So, I liked being a shopkeeper, but the idea of playing Barbies was very confusing for me. And I was much more comfortable playing with the trains and the other paraphernalia in the boys' basements in Ohio.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did your parents feel about it, other than your mom wishing she could put dresses on you?

**Catherine Opie:** I think they were okay with it. My mom was very sporty, being a PE teacher. So, she was always out golfing or doing some kind of bowling team or some kind of sport. So, I think in the end they were okay with it all.

**Jesse Thorn:** Those are such classic like midcentury, Midwestern sporting activities—(*laughs*) to be golfing and bowling as an expression of your sportiness.

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**Catherine Opie:** Yeah. I mean, if you come to my studio, in the kitchen is a plaque from Sandusky, Ohio, that is slightly crooked, and it has the bowling pins on it. And it's like one of the only trophies I ever won in my entire life. And it's 11th place in bowling. And I kind of love that they gave me the 11th place, you know, plaque for bowling.

**Jesse Thorn:** Usually they like stop counting after a certain point, and even if you get a trophy, it's like a thanks for showing up trophy.

**Catherine Opie:** Right. Exactly. No, this was definitely 11th place.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** You built yourself a darkroom at some point, right?

**Catherine Opie:** I did in high school. I was a babysitter, big time babysitter. Loved children. And saved up my babysitting money plus money that my mom gave me, and I bought an enlarger, and made a darkroom in my bathroom where I ruined all the tiles. And they complained to me about the chemistry, but it was where I would spend hours.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, it's really gross, like to be fair. *(Laughs.)*

**Catherine Opie:** There was no ventilation, mind you, except for the fan. And it was probably—I had my grandfather's old enamel darkroom trays, because he had a darkroom in his basement in Ohio. So, I love that I had like paraphernalia from my grandfather's darkroom, like that always meant something to me. And yeah, it was a great way to spend time, and I really loved it. And I kind of miss having a darkroom. I rebuilt the darkrooms at UCLA recently, and I'm hoping one day I have the time to get in there and just play again.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you learn how to do it in school or in scouts or from your grandfather or—?

**Catherine Opie:** Well, from my grandfather at first, but I didn't know the steps. And then I took a photography class in high school, and then I began to learn the steps, but I was impatient. So, most of my friends who are still like, “Whoa, Cathy, you're a photographer! You actually made it!” They meanwhile have prints that were not in the fixer long enough, that are all going brown. And they're like, “Why is my print brown?”

And I was like, “Well, I was an impatient photographer.” *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** What did you take pictures of then?

**Catherine Opie:** In high school, I took kind of some cliché pictures. Like, you know, kittens coming through a pipe on a roof, sunsets, boys running in the cloud. I was trying to get ribbons at the Delmar County Fair. I was really like, okay, I'm going to get a ribbon. You know? Because the 11th place trophy for bowling was a failure. And I did. I got first place ribbons at Delmar County Fair, and I took mainly photographs of the high school plays at Poway High. And I was kind of yearbook photographer, but unofficially yearbook photographer, because I was kind of awkward and geeky and wore the same painter overalls every day to school.

And so, Southern California was not really the greatest place for me as a girl that came out of Ohio who was identified as a tomboy. So, they didn't really want me to be on yearbook, but they really—they put my pictures in the yearbook.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you see pictures then that inspired you?

**Catherine Opie:** When I was nine. That was Lewis Hine, and it was the child labor photographs that were in my social studies book. And I ended up writing a report about the photograph.

**Jesse Thorn:** He took pictures at the beginning of the 20th century, right?

**Catherine Opie:** Yes. He did Ellis Island. He was actually the first photographer that ever presented work to Congress that allowed the child labor laws to change. And it was because of his documentation of these children in these Carolina mills and all of that. And I was really inspired by that, but I also grew up with a lot of paraphernalia of American politics that really informed me. My father owned the largest campaign collection in the country. That's all housed in the Smithsonian now. So, I grew up with the original Lincoln ferrotypes. I grew up with the only representation of FDR in a wheelchair, which was an iron bank that you put a penny in his hand, and it dropped in the blanket in the wheelchair. I still have Abraham Lincoln's death ribbon. I have the Dewey Defeats Truman poster—that was the one that Truman—the newspaper that Truman held up, the actual one.

So, I grew up with this incredible representation of America and the politics of America through political campaigns. And my father was, you know, very quick to make us really understand American history. And I can't say that there isn't that far of a way of that influence—

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—in terms of how I've looked at this country and how I think about it.

**Jesse Thorn:** Was that your dad's job? Was he a dealer, or was it just his hobby?

**Catherine Opie:** Just his hobby. He fell in love with it in high school.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's certainly a geeky pursuit.

**Catherine Opie:** It's geeky. It was interesting, and it was unique, and he was very proud of it. And, yeah, there was still one thing left that now got lost. But I was supposed to get the original GW button, which was an actual button that George Washington wore on his uniform when he was inaugurated. And that was how campaign buttons started was they were coat buttons.

**Jesse Thorn:** Wow! (*Laughs.*)

**Catherine Opie:** I know, who knew?

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, you're talking to a guy that loves stuff. So, this is thrilling to me.

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, well come down to the studio. I'll show you the Abraham Lincoln ribbon. It's amazing.

**Jesse Thorn:** I heard you also have a Garfield there.

**Catherine Opie:** I do have a Garfield there. I don't know why, but I do.

*(They laugh.)*

It was given to me in high school, and I still have it.

**Jesse Thorn:** We're going to take a quick break. When we return, even more with Catherine Opie. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is photographer Catherine Opie. Her pictures have been shown in museums all around the world. She's a former Guggenheim fellow and a professor of photography at UCLA. Right now, she has a career retrospective showing at Regen Projects in Hollywood, California. It's called *harmony is fraught*. Let's get back into our conversation.

Did you think that photographer could be your job?

**Catherine Opie:** I really wanted to be a filmmaker. I really, really wanted to do film. And I looked at the statistics in high school of women who were behind the cameras, and I realized that, no, there was never going to be a pathway forward for me to do that. And so, photography—I was already in love with photography, and it just seemed like a natural path. But my father made me get my real estate license first at 18, and then I was studying to be a kindergarten teacher at a weird all-girls school in Virginia.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you ever sell real estate?

**Catherine Opie:** No, I did a lot of what they call farming for my dad in Southern California. Because when he left Ohio, he started being a realtor and ended up president of San Diego Realtors and, you know, one of those rotary guys. And so, he was very concerned about me wanting to be an artist. Because, you know, artists starve all the time.

**Jesse Thorn:** Why did you go to art school and not teacher school or, you know, into realty?

**Catherine Opie:** Well, I started in teacher school at this women's school in Virginia, Intermont College, that I picked out of the Peterson College Guide in the library. Why? I

don't know. But the main majors there were horsemanship and ballet, so that tells you a lot about its academic pursuits. I imagine I got into it, and so I just decided to go. And then my father was dating his ex-girlfriend in New York, Elinore Schnurr, who was a painter. And this was his high school sweetheart. And so, he got back together with her after my parents divorced. Then I went to visit her, and she was a phenomenal painter. And she said, "What are you doing? Like, what—are you going to spend the rest of your life in tiny chairs? Like, you're an artist. You've always been an artist."

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And so, she said I needed to move to a major city and go to art school. So, the next year I applied to San Francisco Art Institute and got in, and then it was art school all the way.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you start taking pictures of your friends and peers in the lesbian world that surrounded you?

**Catherine Opie:** Right away in San Francisco, as soon as I came out. Then I was also the person—because I'm always the person with the camera. Like, I'm never without a camera. Now the phone is in your pocket, and that's always a camera. But I immediately started taking pictures of my friends, but I was very hesitant to put that out in any kind of way in school or even at Cal Arts. And it was funny, because Catherine Lord was Dean of Cal Arts when I got accepted. And you know, out lesbian. You know, very, very important politically. And so, she had known my photographs from *On Our Backs Magazine*.

So, she was kind of like, "Oh, well, you know, this is a major lesbian photographer we're going to get in the program."

**Jesse Thorn:** And *On Our Backs Magazine* was like a women-owned and run lesbian erotica magazine.

**Catherine Opie:** Yes, it was. And so, my queer work never ended up in my schoolwork.

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It was always separate. And even when I got to Cal Arts and I was starting to photograph the master plan community of Valencia and like beginning to create, you know, a documentation about that, I remember Catherine going like, "But we know that you're Cathy Opie, not Catherine Opie. But we know you're Cathy Opie. You've got this whole other leather life and all of that." And to be honest, even in 1985, I did not feel like it was a safe environment to put my friends and the people that I love up on the walls to critique. And I didn't want my community to be critiqued. And so, I didn't turn into that work until after I graduated from school.

I did one photograph on Valentine's day of this photograph called "Anne-Marie (*sensor beep*)" that I put upstairs. And everybody was like, "Oh my god, this is the best thing I've ever seen!" You know? And I was just like, yeah, but your guys are going to keep getting model homes and stuff around Valencia.

**Jesse Thorn:** What was the first picture you ever sold?

**Catherine Opie:** I think that it was “Mystery Date”, which is now redone on vinyl for the show at *harmony is fraught*. And it was a fellow student, who became a very successful graphic designer right out of college. And I was still just like working \$8 an hour at a camera store. And she knew that I needed money. So, she bought “Mystery Date” for like I think \$250, because that's what I needed at that time.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's in the picture?

**Catherine Opie:** It was made with all my friends on their motorcycles in front of the Palms, which was the only seven day a week lesbian bar in LA. And we would go and wear our fake mustaches and try to pick up women and ask them if they wanted rides home, because that was like such a San Francisco thing, but it was not an LA thing. And I think that I made the picture in 1988/'89 at the same time I was photographing MacArthur Park with a panorama camera. And so, it's just people hanging out on their motorcycles, my friends, and we were—in “Mystery Date”, the idea that some woman would come home with us on the back of our motorcycles, which never happened for me.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) I'm sorry to hear that!

**Catherine Opie:** (*Laughs.*) I know, but I have a picture!

**Jesse Thorn:** What kind of motorcycle were you riding?

**Catherine Opie:** At that point I had an old Honda. I had a '95 Honda, but everybody else, all my friends were on Triumphs or Harleys. So, they were really like—they were much more motorcycle people than I was. And we lived in an apartment building in Koreatown on Catalina Street, which is represented as well with “The Uprising” in the exhibition, *harmony is fraught*. And they would repair all their motorcycles in the back. And it would be like, you know, just like—it was pretty much an all-lesbian apartment building, except for one other person. And we just had a blast there. It was crazy, but we called it Casa de Estrogen.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) One of the things that I was thinking about as I was looking at these pictures is in your pictures of, you know, lesbian communities of various kinds, I was reminded of the ways that public lesbian communities have been diminished in the last few decades. Like, there's so few lesbian bars in all of America.

**Catherine Opie:** Well, yeah, but there's two now in LA.

**Jesse Thorn:** Oh, really?

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, we're going back.

**Jesse Thorn:** Oh, (*laughing*) I like the idea of it as a homecoming.

**Catherine Opie:** It's a homecoming. When I opened *harmony is fraught*, I immediately went to Ruby Fruit, which is in Silver Lake in the mall. And it's a great like really small plate and amazing wine bar, and it's owned by two lesbians who play Indigo Girls in the bathroom the whole time. So, you go in the bathroom, it's always Indigo Girls. Like, can't go wrong there, right?

*(Jesse laughs.)*

So, I took them immediately the poster signed, and I told them that I wanted to photograph them, you know, as shopkeepers to put an image at Ruby Fruit of them. And they were just so touched. They were like, "Oh my god, I can't believe you came and said this to us." But you had a question. So, what was your question?

**Jesse Thorn:** No, just—the question was how do you feel about looking at those communities? And I also think that like in Los Angeles, all those kinds of social communities tend to happen much more privately and domestically. Like, it's just everything is in somebody's backyard in a way that it isn't in San Francisco or New York. You know what I mean?

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**Catherine Opie:** Yeah. I think it's gone to the backyard in San Francisco. I think it wasn't in the backyard when I was in San Francisco. I mean, you would walk down Valencia Street and you would literally have Oconto Bath House, Amelia's, and then you had Artemis Cafe. Right there, boom, bup-bup-bup-ba. You know, coffee with all your friends. It was like within a four/five block radius. Because the lesbians kind of, you know—Castro was gay men, but Valencia Street was total lesbians at that time period. Because I remember in San Francisco that I would want to go to the Eagle for beer busts, you know. And I wasn't allowed as a lesbian to go into the gay male leather bars.

And a lot of that changed around AIDS, but then we lost the sensibility of everything, and we started going back into our living rooms and started having social dinner parties. And we forgot the importance of the lesbian bar. You know, we forgot that actually maybe somebody coming out needs to be in that space. And I'm just grateful that there are actually two places now in LA. I plan on going to Ruby Fruit on Friday night, actually. *(Laughs.)* So.

**Jesse Thorn:** You have been uncomfortable sharing the lesbian leather community with the broader world for critique when you were in school. How did you feel about sharing these people around you with the world when you were out of school?

**Catherine Opie:** It was an interesting thing, because I felt that I was so in my community in a very specific way. And I was an unknown artist. I was starting to show. So, when the work first went out, I first brought it home to San Francisco first. And it was really important for me to bring it to San Francisco, to my community first. Then Regen Projects showed me in a group show and then a solo show after that, and I immediately kind of got a lot of attention in the art world. And I would say that the most difficult moments came when I showed "Pervert" for the first time after making that, and it was in the Whitney Biennial. And I had to go home and show my parents that I made this, and that it was going to be in a major

museum. And then people's assumptions around me, their preconceived ideas of who I was as a person, shocked me.

**Jesse Thorn:** Can you describe the picture for folks who haven't seen it?

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, it's a photograph that I made in 1994 following a self-portrait I did, which was another cutting of two stick-figure girls on my back that—I showed the video in *harmony is fraught* of the making of that, which had never been shown before. But “Pervert” is where I have pervert carved on my chest. It's made by one of the great body artists, Raelyn Gallina, who succumbed to breast cancer and died.

**Jesse Thorn:** That is to say—when you say carved on your chest, like with a blade.

**Catherine Opie:** With a blade, with a scalpel. And then my two best friends from Body Manipulation, which is a piercing studio, did lines of 12-gauge hypodermic needles in me. I'm wearing a leather hood, and with a leather hood you have no, you know, idea of my identity, because I'm wearing my identity on my body with “pervert”. And so, the first place that this photograph ever showed was in the 1995 Whitney Biennial.

**Jesse Thorn:** And “pervert” is written very—I mean, carved very beautifully into your chest.

**Catherine Opie:** Beautiful script. And, then Raelyn picked up the kind of florid kind of design of the backdrop and put it underneath “pervert”. So, it's—and there's no blood dripping. It's like—a lot of people think that pervert is a red ink tattoo. It's not a tattoo. It was a cutting, but we got it to a place where it wasn't dripping, because I wanted it not to be bloody in that way.

**Jesse Thorn:** You had to like wipe it down.

**Catherine Opie:** A lot. Yeah. (*Chuckles.*) Yes. Yes. A lot of rubbing alcohol being sprayed. A lot of paper towels, a lot of—I mean, and I have that on videotape too, and one day I'm going to release that out in the world just itself. Because it's an amazing documentation of community and how community comes together. But yeah, people assumed things about me. They were scared of me. They thought that I was going to be a very harsh person. I was always told after every interview, “Oh my god, I was so scared to talk to you, but you're really nice.” And then there were moments where collectors would buy the work, and it would be like a portrait of friends of mine who had transitioned.

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But I never said—you know, I always just used names. I never was interested in labeling people F to M or things like that. I just—they were people. And they would be like, “Yeah, we have—you know, we have Mike and Skye hanging in the bathroom. And that way when men go and pee, they're looking at like women who are now men.” And I would just be horrified.

And I would be like, “Can I just have my work back? What am I doing? Did I think about what it meant to sell these photographs?”

And I think that there was a reason why after the Whitney, you got “Freeway”, and you got “American Cities”. And I didn't return to making queer work until “Domestic”, which was in '98, where I bought an RV and traveled around the country with an eight by ten camera, photographing women's households together.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with photographer Catherine Opie after a quick break. She's seen a lot of changes in her life lately. A divorce, a kid gone to college, a retrospective show. How does she feel about all that? We'll talk about it. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Funky synth.

**Emily Fleming:** I'm Emily Fleming.

**Jordan Morris:** And I'm Jordan Morris.

**Emily:** We're real comedy writers.

**Jordan:** And real friends!

**Emily:** And real cheapskates.

**Jordan:** We say, why subscribe to expensive streaming services when you can stream tons of insane movies online for free?

**Emily:** Yeah, as long as you're fine with 25 randomly inserted, super loud car insurance commercials.

**Jordan:** On our podcast, *Free With Ads*, we review streaming movies from the darkest corner of the internet's bargain bin.

**Emily:** From the good, to the weird, to the hooooly—look at Van Damme's big ol' butt!

**Jordan:** *Free With Ads!* A free podcast about free movies that's worth the price of admission.

**Emily:** Every Tuesday on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or your favorite pod spot.

**Music:** *Free with ads!*

(*Music ends.*)

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with photographer Catherine Opie.

One of the self-portraits from that time cutting that you alluded to is about domesticity.

(*Catherine confirms.*)

And it is—you kind of very briefly described it, but it's your back. And carved into your back is like a domestic scene with two stick figures of women holding hands, like a child might draw.

**Catherine Opie:** It's a kindergarten teacher drawing. Yeah.

(*They chuckle.*)

It goes back to kindergarten.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, for real. And like watching the video of the making of the picture, which is in the exhibition, *harmony is fraught*, the thing that I was struck by was—you know, it's a very visceral thing to see someone's blood coming out of their skin. And certainly, to carve into someone's skin with a scalpel.

**Catherine Opie:** And it was the artist, Judie Bamber, who had never even done it before—as you know, if you watched the whole video.

**Jesse Thorn:** And like... it's an interesting combination of vibes going on in the room on the video. (*Chuckling.*) Everyone is like—seems trepidatious and aware of the like intensity of what's happening, but also pretty genial. Like, there's a lot of laughing about it.

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, there's a lot of laughing.

**Jesse Thorn:** Was that part of your experience of being in those leather communities, where there was, you know, ritualized or sexualized violence and body manipulation?

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, and it was an incredible moment to be in the leather community, because of what blood meant within the community too. So, we can't not acknowledge that blood was the scared substance. And so, when we would be in joint play parties in San Francisco, where leather men and leather dykes started playing together for the first time—because we were also sitting bedside, putting IVs in, helping our friends who were very sick. And so, we already—the leather community already—like, you know, we understand kind of medical procedures. (*Chuckles.*) Because we don't want to cause permanent harm in any kind

of way. It's all consensual. And the leather community and the kind of love and support of that community is unbelievable.

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And it's so misrepresented and misunderstood in a certain way. And I just feel incredibly grateful that I've had these people in my life to have these experiences with my body and have the love and the care that it takes to actually open up and, you know, not just do that privately within the dungeon, but then what it meant for me to make it public as well.

**Jesse Thorn:** There's a third self-portrait that shares a lot with those two pictures we talked about, and it's a picture of you breastfeeding your son.

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah. Yeah. "Self-Portrait Nursing". It's the trilogy.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, why did you want that to be the third piece of that trilogy?

**Catherine Opie:** Because it's something that I wanted from the very first cutting on my back. That all I ever wanted was like domesticity. I wanted a child. I wanted a home. I wanted to be an out lesbian with that. I wanted it to be so much about that, that when I got to have Oliver, and I was able to nurse—and that was such a huge connection between my son and I—that I knew then that was the third self-portrait. Because I love that I'm an older dyke. Like, I had him in my—when I was 40. So, in that picture, I think I'm almost 41, or I am 41.

And so, you begin to see like not the "Madonna and Child" image, but in playing with art history as much as I've played with it. But you see that I'm like, you know, an older woman that has the scar of "pervert" on her chest with the tattoos and with this milky, beautiful, little baby boy that I was able to have.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's a really beautiful—it's a really beautiful picture.

**Catherine Opie:** Aw, thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Why did you set those pictures in that context of like opulence? You know, like old fashioned portrait of a king, you know, brocade and filigree?

**Catherine Opie:** (*Laughs.*) Because it's a way to stop the audience. If I had done it in my bedroom, or if I'd done it under kind of a documentary guise, I wouldn't have had the connection with the history of painting. You know, I also have a show up right now in New York called *Walls, Windows, and Blood*, in which I photograph the Vatican. And it's another kind of relationship to the Holy Trinity. I wanted the art history references to be imbued within the work so that it was taken seriously.

**Jesse Thorn:** You've taken a lot of pictures of high school football players and surfers. There are women in both of those groups of people, particularly surfers, but they're still sort of like

communities of dudes, largely. And I wonder like what your interest was in these dude worlds.

**Catherine Opie:** I think it's a question of masculinity and the performance of masculinity and our preconceived ideas around masculinity, too. That as a leather dyke or a butch, I could perform masculinity. But then, who is it for me to actually create judgments on high school football players when they are actually going through an incredible, vulnerable moment within their lives?

And when I was doing that as an extension of American landscape and what that identity is and thinking about American identity, we were going to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. So, the relationship to the body of those young players and what they're trained to basically do—to be soldiers in some ways, if they don't get the college scholarship—it really, really moved me. And I realized that in the same way that my friends had a certain kind of vulnerability, that these young men also did. And I just wanted to talk about their bodies and their awkwardness and how they were as human as I am, being a lesbian.

**Jesse Thorn:** I read an interview where you used a word to describe the high school football players that just left me gob smacked. Which was “floppy”. (*Chuckling.*) You described them as being floppy.

**Catherine Opie:** They were! Because there's sometimes too big of arms. Or there's the freshman football player who's never going to look like the senior football player, but they're just trying. And they're all just trying in these different ways of performing masculinity within their own bodies. And it felt very—I don't know.

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It felt like it needed to be talked about.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did you ask people to trust you?

**Catherine Opie:** Well, this was the tough one. This was—I had a wiki war. Because they did not want to change the Wikipedia photograph from “Pervert”, which is one photograph that I've made out of a lot of bodies of work. So, I had a little private wiki war with somebody who like—

**Jesse Thorn:** So like, when somebody googled your name, they would get your Wikipedia page.

**Catherine Opie:** They would get “Pervert”.

**Jesse Thorn:** And the like illustration of you would be you with “pervert” carved into your chest. Usually it's like somebody like signing autographs at a comic book convention or something.

**Catherine Opie:** No, it's like me with “pervert” carved in my chest when you open Wikipedia. So, I had a little wiki war, because I was really concerned about it. So, I wrote—because I was a professor at UCLA, I reached out to every high school football coach of different regions that I wanted, because I wanted a broad swath of American landscape from Ohio to Hawaii to Alaska and, you know, Texas and California. I wanted it to represent like the whole country, because wherever you go, there's a high school football field. You know?

So, I wrote on UCLA letterhead and then introduced myself as a professor of photography and that I'll be in the region this period of time. And would it be okay if I came and photographed a game and then did portraits of your players after a practice? Not after a game, but after practice. And so, you know, out of a number of high schools that I wrote to, they replied. And then what I did was, because these were minors—and this is why the Wikipedia war page, is I didn't want parents Googling me and going like, “Ugh!” in Texas, like who are, you know, just being like, “No way!”

And so, I would send in that kind of school folder, the eight by ten of their kid with a model release signature. So, I would gift them a print, you know. And then the ones that I got model releases back from were the edit that happened within the body of work.

**Jesse Thorn:** I want to ask you something about your life, which is, you have this big show, *harmony is fraught*. And you're entering your 60s, here. You're retiring from UCLA, where you've taught for a long time. You are separated from your former wife.

**Catherine Opie:** Yes. We're officially divorced now, as of February 1st. So, that was a 21-year relationship.

**Jesse Thorn:** You have a kid who is now in college. Right?

**Catherine Opie:** Graduating from college in May.

**Jesse Thorn:** That is quite a number of monumental life changes to go through at the same time.

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, sure is! (*Chuckles.*) Yeah, I think *harmony is fraught* came out of that—actually, out of all of these monumental changes, the divorce was really hard. It was, you know, over two years where I wanted a fairytale divorce, and it wasn't. It was extractive and hard and litigious. Yeah. You know, I never was somebody who was on the bandwagon for queer marriage, except for feeling that equality is equality. And watching families come in and take others' possessions, because they didn't believe in their homosexual kids during the AIDS crisis was too much. So, I fought for the right to be married, and I believe in equality in that way. But you know, the other side of it is like, then you get to have gay divorce too. Which is—well, when it's litigious, it's heartbreaking.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have to think about—obviously, this show is retrospective. I mean, there's work that goes back decades and decades.

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah, 30 years.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have to think about, gosh, what am I going to do with the next 10, 20, 30 years of my life?

**Catherine Opie:** No, that was the nice thing about going back in some ways is to celebrate who I was and to remind myself who I was outside of my marriage. And that was like a little bit like—and remind myself of what I've looked at in LA and that I have been this whole person that—you know, before I got together with Julie in 2001. 'Cause she moved in three months after—Oliver was born in 2002, and she moved into the house in West Adams that we bought together—we came out on a house hunting trip. She was in St. Louis; I was at Yale. She had never been with a woman before. she had a 21-year-old daughter who ended up moving in with us.

[00:40:00]

And I have a 10-year-old grandson as well, Joaquin, that I'm very close to. But we kind of had one of those instant families. Like, all of a sudden I went from being by myself all the time, deciding to get pregnant on my own, because it was time. I had health insurance, and I was 40. So, I wasn't—I wanted the two stick figure girls, but I was just going to go at it alone. And you know, it was incredible. She moved in 2002, like basically, you know, May. Oliver was three months old, and we had an incredible 21-year journey together that I'm completely grateful for. And I will not let the last two years of my divorce be what our relationship was. I refuse. *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Was it hard for you to look at pictures of domesticity and in some cases, literally, of you and your family? You know, there's that beautiful picture of your son in the tutu and the washing machine or whatever it is. But you know, there's also a picture of you with a stick figure portrait of domesticity carved into your back. And there's pictures from a series of pictures of, you know, female couples having domestic lives. You know, there's like all these depictions of that thing that you wanted so bad.

**Catherine Opie:** Yeah. I think that one of my great, great, close friends said a really good thing to me. They were like, "Cathy, you do your life kind of in chapters. And look, there's not that many people that have a successful 21-year marriage. There's—you know, that's kind of surprising in itself. And you got to have your stick figure girl moment. So, now you're moving on to your chapter where it's the last chapter in some ways of one's life, is—" I'll be 63 in April. And if I'm lucky, I have maybe 24/25 more years to live. You know, if I'm fortunate enough. And I'm looking forward to it. Like, Oliver's going to graduate from college. And I kind of feel that even coming off a 20-day road trip in Norway of looking at Blue Mountains and not having to be a part of the academic schedule anymore, that I'm looking at a reopening of my life.

And so, in some ways you have to look at your past to be able to begin a new future. And I think that's a little bit what the show is doing as well, is reminding me of a life of love and longing and a pursuit of what it means to create history through image making.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Catherine, I'm really grateful you came in, and thanks for making these incredible pictures. I really loved getting a chance to look at them.

**Catherine Opie:** Oh, thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Catherine Opie. Her show, as we have said, is called *harmony is fraught*. It's up at Regen Projects in Hollywood through March 3rd. If you're in town and you can see it, you definitely should. If you aren't, you can find her pictures in book form. The book is just called *Catherine Opie*. I promise you'll see something incredible.

**Transition:** Bright, upbeat synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, I'm still working on my backyard studio/office. And boy, are there a lot of different colors of white paint. I went with Cottage White. If you're interested, that's paint number W3-3. "It's a color with unmistakable honey gold notes like a picket fence in a bucolic country setting reflecting the sun or the golden meadows surrounding it." Almost exactly the same as all of the other whites.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation" by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. We are sharing all kinds of stuff lately on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). Follow us there. I am personally on Instagram as well, [@Put.This.On](#).

I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*