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Pervert #2 and American Photographer

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Pervert #2 and American Photographer

Declan Kennedy

In Catherine Opie's photograph, *Self Portrait (Pervert)*, she presents an image of the word "pervert" cut into her chest in a similar style to scarification. However, while tattoos are gaining acceptance in society, scarification is still a taboo subject in most circles. Because of its extreme nature, scarification is often unfavorably compared to self-mutilation, and some members of the body modification community do their best to highlight the differences between tattoos and scarification in an attempt to better the image of the tattoo community. This theme of alienation carries over in other areas of Opie's life, as she counts herself as a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender (LGBT) community and the leather community, which is a subset of the LGBT community that practices Bondage, Dominance, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM). Again, because of the arguably extreme nature of the practices of the BDSM and Leather communities, some in the mainstream LGBT community do their best to portray the BDSM community as a separate entity. As the LGBT community at large fights for rights, a crucial question focuses on acceptance and what is included in the LGBT community. In this sense Opie's works, *Self Portrait (Pervert)* (as well as *American Photographer*) acts as a narrative of her struggle for identity and acceptance.

Opie admits in earlier work that she "knew she was a lesbian in high school." However, she was never quite comfortable with her identity as a lesbian until she became a member of the San Francisco leather scene. As the community that shaped her identity began to shape her work, she began to photograph her friends within the community, mostly in portraiture. Eventually, she became confident enough to create *Self-Portrait (Pervert)*.

To produce *Pervert*, Opie relied on help from several friends within the leather community. Two of her friends placed the needles in each arm, while another friend carved "pervert" into her chest with a flowing, flowery script. A fourth acted as the photographer. Opie faces the camera head-on, confident and secure. With Opie's upright posture drawing attention to "pervert" carved into her chest, she emphasizes a label important to understanding the portrait. Because BDSM communities generally exist outside of mainstream society, contact between the two groups is very limited. While BDSM communities are often diverse, relatively few members of the community bring BDSM into their everyday lives. Contrary to this restrictive mindset, the leather community generally openly acknowledges their role in the BDSM scene. Because of this openness, however, many members of the leather community are often scorned and labeled as degenerate or perverse--their actions condemned as immoral expressions of deviant sexuality.

In an effort to separate the LGBT community from this perception of deviancy, some members of the gay community look down upon the leather community, and those who were once called "freaks" themselves now label others as "freaks." In this sense, by branding herself a pervert, Opie is working to reclaim the word much in the way the word "queer" has been reclaimed. By choosing to describe herself in that way, she works to lessen the power the word has over her.

Opie's pride also constitutes another important element of her photography, and she often uses portraiture to highlight and comment on the dignity of her subjects. Traditionally, portraiture was the domain of wealthy individuals looking to cement their immortality, and only a privileged few had both the time and the money to commission a portrait. As a result,

portraiture has historically focused on nobility and royalty. On the other hand, Opie's subjects come from historically victimized groups. The LGBT community has long suffered at the hands of those in power, and it was only within the last few decades that same-sex attraction has shed its classification as a mental disorder. Fully aware of this history, Opie purposefully chose to shoot *Pervert* against an opulent black-and-gold backdrop with clasped hands reminiscent of a nobleman's wife. These signals evoke visual themes of purity and class. Portraits inherently imply that there is something noteworthy and worth preserving about the subject and are intended to stand for the subject's legacy—a reminder of “who they were.” The intended effect is one of admiration. Much in the way Opie reclaims the term “pervert,” she also takes imagery reminiscent of oppression and reclaims it for the oppressed.

Contrary to portraiture, exploitative works, common in early photography, invite the opposite sentiment. Early photography often showcased “freaks,” and many photographers made a business of them by selling photos of physical deformities as novelty items. These images are intended to evoke pity, disgust, confusion, and emotions where the viewer is made to feel superior. Opie, also conscious of this history of exploitation, uses the needles and the mask as icons of the leather community and, by forgoing subtlety, she asks the viewer to face her identity within the leather community head-on. However, by combining this truth with portraiture, she aligns the photo with a tradition of power, not one of exploitation. Opie's upright pose signifies that she sees nothing wrong nor deviant with her identity. She accepts the label society has given her, and she accepts it knowing that the community she belongs to is more important to her than how society labels her. Her confident, assured pose invites the viewer to reconsider their perspective, to realize that the community Opie belongs to does not determine her humanity.

Opie began profiling members of the leather community for a few years before *Pervert*, but she had never photographed herself in the same way. According to *American Photographer*, Opie was finally pushed to react when controversy over the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the works of Robert Mapplethorpe became a part of the raging culture war. Mapplethorpe, who is also a member of the leather community, dealt with many of the same subjects as Opie. Often as much a subject of his art as the creator of it, Mapplethorpe generated controversy with the sexual content of some of his photography. However, while some of his work is sexually explicit, simply exploring these themes does not mean his work is obscene. Mapplethorpe's work was considered obscene because it explored the alternative. Social acceptability, not sex, was the issue,

Opie, enraged by this controversy, created *Pervert*. In her work, the sexual themes presented in *Pervert* are explicit, but they are not obscene. Opie does not attempt to titillate audiences. Though historically the nude has been used to comment on the perfection of the body with defined muscles and youthful figures, Opie deviates from this idealized vision of the human form. Opie represents real sexuality, the kind of sex that an everyday person might have. Her body is not “perfect,” but she accepts that and exhibits it all the same. Also, the use of the mask over Opie's face is not, as one might expect, an attempt to hide. Instead, the mask functions as an emblem of her chosen identity within the leather community. By removing the face from the portrait in such a way, Opie forces the viewers to confront the S/M imagery. Opie simply presents the “deviant” aspect of herself in a sincere version of sexuality, and identity—the viewer can do with that what they wish.

Self Portrait (Pervert) is, more than anything, a brave work. Firmly entrenching herself within an often-disparaged community is a risky move, but it is a move that Opie makes proudly. Fully aware that she would not have become the person she is if she had not been a part of the

leather community, she turns that identity it into something to be proud of. Ultimately, her statement not only advocates for the outcast, but for herself.