

CATHERINE OPIE

American, born Sandusky, OH, 1961

Skeeter from the series *Portraits*, 1993

Chromogenic print, 40 × 30 inches

Gift of Armyan Bernstein and Christine Meleo Bernstein, 2018.9

Among the photographs in Catherine Opie's series *Portraits*—made between 1993 and 1997—*Skeeter* (1993) is unusual. A pillar of sunflowers leaning against the table commands as much space as does Skeeter, who breathes them in while seated. By being present with these organic bodies, Skeeter embodies care, quietude, and reflection.

Signaling such quiet strength was crucial for Opie, as Skeeter and her cohort of sitters for the series also comprise the photographer's own chosen family within the LGBTQ+ community in San Francisco in the early 1990s during the AIDS crisis. To portray these sitters as both present and dignified along gallery walls was—and remains—a significant political intervention. Opie explained: "A good amount of my friends were fighting AIDS or dying. A lot of them. And I wanted to make a body of work about the queer community that used bright backgrounds offsetting it, almost like a Hans Holbein painting."¹

Indeed, Opie's spectrum of emerald greens evokes the backgrounds of sixteenth-century portraiture. Each sunflower's vibrant yellow bloom brightens Skeeter's skin tone, offering reprieve from an otherwise dark setting. The decaying bramble on the table, likewise reminiscent of Holbein and his contemporaries, anchors the bouquet as precious and fleeting. It also inverts the pale green glint of Skeeter's wristwatch—a minute detail that likewise signals the passage of time. Opie's bold color decisions bring attention to Skeeter's tattoo of a rising sun, which serves as a permanent reminder of renewal, vitality, courage, and energy.

The strategic art-historical citations Opie used to portray otherwise marginalized subjects bring visual and political representation to a compelling intersection, revealing the difficult intimacies and responsibilities of telling an individual, yet deeply collective, history.

— Sarah M. Estrela '22 PhD, Art History
Block Curatorial Graduate Fellow, 2018–19

1 "Catherine Opie's groundbreaking queer portraiture," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, video, 3:59, June 22, 2018, <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/catherine-opies-groundbreaking-queer-portraiture/>.