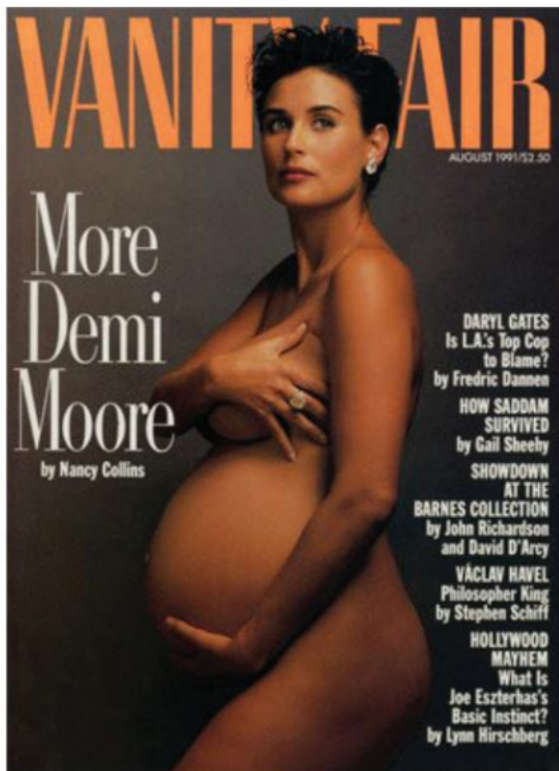


Facing Oppression

Mainstreaming the Marginalized through Portraiture

BY MARGARET DUFFEY, ARTS EDITOR

While a portrait frames only one face, it tells two stories. The invisible story is that of the artist: who they choose as subjects, what colors they select, how they pose their subjects and what backgrounds they use all reveal almost as much about the artist as they do about the subject. Factors such as environment, race, gender, sexuality and class define the artist and inspire their personal portraiture style. The following three LGBTQ+ artists, Annie Leibovitz, Kehinde Wiley and Catherine Opie, have worked to redefine and reposition marginalized communities in mainstream culture through portraiture.



THE HIVE

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

Annie Leibovitz, arguably one of the most talented American portrait photographers, has an extensive work history, which includes some of Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair's most recognizable pieces. Just hours before the assassination of John Lennon, Leibovitz took a picture of him, naked and clinging to a clothed Yoko Ono for Rolling Stone. Captioned "More Demi Moore," Leibovitz's Vanity Fair cover of the naked, pregnant actress drew a mix of criticism and compliments for its highly intimate appearance. Leibovitz was also behind the widely distributed Caitlyn Jenner cover, which marked her public introduction as Caitlyn.⁷

Leibovitz was in a 15-year relationship with Susan Sontag, a talented essayist,⁸ until Sontag passed away in 2004. Leibovitz's documentation of Sontag's life and death, including her struggle with cancer, is possibly her strongest work, as it explores a level of intimacy distinct to a personal relationship.¹ What distinguishes Leibovitz from other photographers, though, is her ability to achieve a level of trust with a subject soon after introduction. "When I say I want to photograph someone, what it really means is that I'd like to know them. Anyone I know, I photograph," Leibovitz said.⁹ Her ability to capture the individuality of a subject in a single image is a testament to her talent and approachability as an artist.

¹"Annie Leibovitz," Biography.com, January 8, 2016.

²"Susan Sontag," Biography.com, July 15, 2015.

³John Paul Caponigro, "28 Quotes By Photographer Annie Leibovitz," John Paul Caponigro: Illumination Creativity, February 20, 2014.

KEHINDE WILEY

Through contrasting culturally distinct styles, Kehinde Wiley initiates a conversation surrounding historical oppression of black and brown people. Drawing inspiration from classical European portraiture in background style and model positioning, his use of models of color wearing street and hip-hop-inspired clothing strikes viewers as surprising. The larger-than-life scale of the portraits and bright colors amplify the impact of his works. Within the typically whitewashed portrait galleries of traditional museums, Wiley's work gives brown and black people a place in the traditional context, without sacrificing their cultural identities. His artwork aims to "quote historical sources and position young, black men within the field of power."⁷

Wiley wears what appears to be a wedding ring on his left hand, despite being a single gay man, in an effort to make his models feel comfortable posing for him.⁸ It appears to work, as his portraits exude a level of strength and confidence which feels distantly familiar. The familiarity is stemmed in portraits of strong European monarchs, so, through the insertion of color, he and his models redefine the traditional power dynamic which is typically confined within whiteness.

This past fall, former President Barack Obama selected Wiley to paint his official presidential portrait.⁹ In light of Wiley's efforts to redefine what a leader looks like, it seems appropriate that he will be painting the first African-American president. Wiley's painting will stand out in The Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, where all 43 presidential portraits to come before Obama are white.



KEHINDEWILEY.COM

⁷Kehinde Wiley, "About," Kehinde Wiley Studio, Accessed on November 3, 2017.

⁸Wyatt Mason, "How Kehinde Wiley Makes a Masterpiece," GQ

⁹Anne Quito "Obama Picks Genius Hip-Hop Portraitist Kehinde Wiley to Paint His Official Presidential Portrait," Quartz, October 14, 2017.

CATHERINE OPIE

Throughout Catherine Opie's career, her style of photographic portraiture has evolved, strategically switching between color and darkness to place emphasis on particular themes and details. Similar to Wiley in her most recent exhibitions "Portraits and Landscapes"⁷ and "Keeping an Eye on the World,"⁸ Opie employs powerful poses, which reference European portraiture. Unlike Wiley, who is known for his explosive backgrounds, Opie uses darkness to illicit quietly powerful, yet uncomfortable impressions. Her subjects seem to simultaneously blend into and stand out against their dark backdrops. On this observation, she has said, "For me, it was a question of creating space in the image so that the body becomes a form of architecture in relation to the structure, while at the same time being about the person in the community."⁹

Throughout her career, Opie has worked to reposition members of marginalized subcultures, such as those of queer and leather communities. She has drawn inspiration from traditional 16th century artists, such as Hans Holbein who focused on staging to place members of these often rejected communities within a historically powerful context.⁹

Opie told Artnet.com that living in President Donald Trump's America is "horrible." She said "the culture of hate is well and alive in America in the most disgusting way. I would have never imagined that we would be here following an Obama presidency." As a lesbian professor and artist, she challenges this hate on a daily basis through her work, which rejects the reality she describes in modern America.⁹



REGEN PROJECTS

All of these artists repurpose traditional styles to mainstream marginalized communities. Through the faces they paint and photograph, they identify the strength of individuality. By creating visual representations of these oppressed communities, the artists address discrimination and rejection in America today. ■

⁷"Catherine Opie: Portraits and Landscapes," Wexner Center for the Arts.

⁸"Catherine Opie — Keeping an Eye on the World," Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

⁹Loreana Muñoz-Alonso, "Catherine Opie on Her Majestic New Portraits, the 'Alt-Right,' and the Misogyny of the Art Market," Artnet News, October 17, 2017.