



The Modernist | Catherine Opie

June 10 - August 22, 2020



Catherine Opie, Still from *The Modernist*, 2017 © Catherine Opie. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.

Single Channel HD Video and Sound | 21:44 minutes

The Modernist (2017) by Catherine Opie is a mesmerising narrative transversal of the ideals of modernist architecture. This recent body of work by Opie includes her first video work built from 852 black and white still photographs. Opie predominantly works in serial print photography, dissecting and researching her subjects through multiple images that often form one large scale work or installation. *The Modernist* is no exception but for its durational video, which has a narrative arc. This structural montage of still images is presented as a solo exhibition at Plug In ICA and is in part a homage to the 1962 science fiction film *La Jetée* by French filmmaker Chris Marker. Her reference to this quintessential film is extended through, her subjective allusion to a future not tethered to the past. Both *La Jetée* and *The Modernist* allude to a new era based on the destruction of the past.

Opie's video montage depicts iconic modernist homes in Los Angeles designed by American architects: John Lautner's Chemosphere House, built in 1961 and his Sheats-Goldstein house built in 1963, as well as the house built by A. Quincy Jones for Gary Cooper in 1955, and the Stahl house in Hollywood Hills designed by Pierre Koenig in 1959. These canonical modern homes signify the Modernist archetypes of progress and advancement within a modesty of line, simplicity of design and immersion into their surroundings, which simultaneously and conversely plays into establishing their current elite status and high-end market value. The fact that art dealing magnate Larry Gagosian now owns the Cooper house and Jennifer Aniston resides in the Bel Air house designed by Jones alludes to their symbolic and tangible role in the extremities of current economic divides.

Images of these modernist homes are most often represented devoid of people, pristinely preserved, still and empty. Opie slowly develops tension with the insertion of one character. In the center of Opie's narrative line is a sole protagonist played by Pig Pen, a reoccurring figure and subject in Opie's work. Pig Pen's character is a sanguine presence -- an optimistic disturbance that is not about the destruction of the present but liberation from past constrictions. Their figure alone disturbs the clean angular lines of the iconic modernist building as if Pig Pen's heavily tattooed body is glaring in contrast to the symmetry and uniformity of these homes. Viennese architect Adolf Loos' early 20th century treaty against ornamentation comes to mind, as if simply being present is in itself excessive. For Loos, "the person who runs around in a velvet suit is no artist but a buffoon or merely a decorator,"¹ and, it seems in the representation of modern architecture, the addition of the body itself, whether adorned with velvet or tattoos or not, debases the scene.

The absence of people within historical and popular representations of canonical modernist architecture is a common place conundrum that reifies these angularly open-concept, and indeterminately spatially designed houses into rarefied art objects to be seen and not used. It is one thing to love the form of these beautifully composed houses set perfectly within their lush surroundings; it is another thing to live within them. To be a body within these sparsely and angular spaces is to contaminate them, and that is Opie's disruption.

Carrying a gas can, our protagonist appears on the exterior of one of Lautner's houses, pouring its contents around the edges of the building. Coolly and with calm, they light a cigarette, hovering a match above the ground dense with gasoline. The single sound in this video is of a match struck and burst into flames is here and reflects the lone presence of our agitator and arson.

The material substance of the canon of modernist architecture is easily subsumed by flames and burnt into embers. Opie obliterates this persistent history, leaving a fertile and unencumbered ground from which to inscribe new forms, new ideologies and new bodies. Instead of simply countering, rewriting or transforming masculine domains, or overlaying alternative narratives of inclusion by implanting gender, racial, and intersectionality into existing forms or systems, Opie virtually destroys them.

Paul B. Preciado in his short text, "My Trans Body is an Empty House" uses the scenario of living in an empty home as a place to display his subjectivity. It is a place that is unencumbered by normative gender binaries: "Living in a completely empty house gives each gesture its inaugural character, holds back the time of repetition, suspends the interrogation that challenges the norm..." With this empty space offering "[f]reedom from habit [that] extends to other bodies that penetrate this space..."² anyone who enters is also free from these norms. Preciado's empty house is Opie's

burnt and vacant lot. It is not enough to live within walls constructed inside a Modernist paradigm. They must be dismantled before gender and economic norms can be subverted and true change can take place. The idols of Modernism cannot withstand the interruption of the living body – organic, adorned, animated, irregular, unbalanced, scatological. The body here has the power to vanish existing restrictive systems and thus establish its own domain.

When presenting the video aspect of *The Modernist*, Opie constructs a particular viewing experience, framing the video projection within a room that has a distinct and precisely designed façade. The viewer enters through a grandiose architectural framework. For the first presentation of this video, Opie worked with the Los Angeles based architect Michael Maltzan to design an enclosed theatre that references the lines of modernist architecture. For *Plug In*, Opie has designed an undulating wall that runs the width of the gallery to confront the viewer. These structures not only evoke the architecture represented in *The Modernist*, but also draw awareness to one's body, movement and stature, as the viewer enters the gallery. These installation structures give presence to the viewer and thus places them into the scene, as interruptions. The viewer becomes the protagonist, the adornment or disruptive presence in a privileged aesthetic that has asserted its presence in the absence of those who live in them.

Is "The Modernist" the protagonist, or something they want to destroy? Or is it that the protagonist can only become "The Modernist" when the scene is cleared for them to define their own subjective position? Or is "The Modernist's" relationship with the things and systems they destroy more perversely masochistic. Pig Pen's character surrounds themselves with mid-century modern furniture and accents, including iconic Julius Shulman photographs of modern architecture, in a stylized one-room basement apartment. They are possessed by design and the desire of design, destroying what they loves. But their conscience is cleared as they obsessively collect news clipping, related to their own arsonist actions. Words like "chaos," "victory", and "burned to the ground" cross the headlines as proof of their complete dedication to re-inventing the Los Angeles cityscape and their place within it.

There is no visible fear on "The Modernist's" face as they commit these crimes, and no expression when they read the media fallout, but there is intent. They are a criminal, but also an activist removing monuments to a dogmatic past in order to pave the way for an undefined future. They are both villain and hero, and Opie's video rhetorically overplays a critique of Modernism to create drama while simultaneously diverting attention to the positions and bodies that do not fit into the Modernist project. There is a contradiction in "The Modernist" who doesn't conform to the aesthetic and, economic and value systems propagated by their name. They incongruently identify with the ideals implied by the nomenclature, and at the same time can only exist devoid of the limits of its binary prescripts.

Jenifer Pappararo

1. Adolf Loos. "Ornament and Crime," *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*. Ariadne Press, 1997.
2. Paul B. Preciado. "My Trans Body is an Empty House." *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing* (Semiotext(e)), 2020.