

REGEN PROJECTS

Timberg, Scott. "Fire Starter." Los Angeles Magazine (January 2018) p. 48 [ill.]

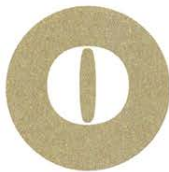
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FILM

Fire Starter

L.A.'S FAMED MIDCENTURY HOMES ARE BURNED TO THE GROUND IN THE MODERNIST, PHOTOGRAPHER CATHERINE OPIE'S FIRST MOVIE



OVER THE DECADES fine arts photographer Catherine Opie has made a name for herself by lending a certain formalism to the least formal of subjects. Her muted, black-and-white images of barren freeways and cityscapes have an almost X-ray effect; her portraits—whether of high school football players, denizens of the leather community, or even her own pale, bleeding back carved with an image of two stick-figure females holding hands—are stark and empathetic.

This month Regen Projects debuts *The Modernist* (January 12 through February 17), a 22-minute film made of more than 800 photographs. The 56-year-old artist's inspiration came from Chris Marker's 1962 French film, *La Jetée*, also comprised almost entirely of photos. While Marker's skews postapocalyptic (Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* borrowed heavily from its plot), Opie's is an avant-garde meditation on Los Angeles, where she arrived from San Francisco in 1985 to attend CalArts before moving to a pre-gentrified downtown L.A. "I think about this city all the time," she says, easygoing in a T-shirt and trucker cap, as the film plays on her studio wall.

The Modernist is more than just its story line, but it's got a killer plot. A frustrated artist (played by Opie's longtime collaborator, a trans man who goes by the name Pig Pen) covets midcentury modern homes designed by the likes of Neutra and Lautner as well as the celebrated Shulman photographs that capture them. Unable to afford a house, and with rage mounting, he begins pasting images from the *Los Angeles Times*—including ones of wildfires—over Shulman's iconic photos. "Then he starts burning down the actual houses," Opie says. The gesture comes from her own anger at how modernism, originally developed as a low-cost design mode for the middle and working classes, has turned into a luxury good. "It's ironic because Lautner is one of my favorite architects," Opie says. "You destroy what you love."

Like much of Opie's work, *The Modernist* is an exercise in nostalgia: Our antihero longs for an era we'll likely never see again. "It's metaphorical," says Opie, who teaches at UCLA. "Have we actually lost the idea of the utopic city? Artists in L.A. won't be able to live in L.A. much longer—I don't know what my students are going to do." > SCOTT TIMBERG

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