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Photography exhibition celebrates the feminine face of the sacred hand

By **Jennifer Cho Salaff**
Staff Writer

The hands are worth a thousand words.

A new photographic exhibition at the Cal Poly Pomona Downtown Center in the Pomona Arts Colony celebrates the extraordinary spirit of ordinary women. "Blessed Are These Hands," inspired by a poem from the book "Earth Prayers," tell the stories of 59 everyday subjects, whose ages range from 4 to 80. Artists Marvelle Thompson and Susan Kullmann explore spirituality, fertility, power, nature, family and love through the hands of women holding symbols of what they consider sacred or holy.

"I made a vow to do something creative that honors women," Thompson, 55, said. "In some small way, I wanted to repay the debt I owe to all women. Women whose hands have embraced life and the constant battle for justice."

The collection features photographs of the hands of girls, young and old women holding objects that are an outward expression of their deepest self -- a butterfly, a strand of beads, a gold statue of Lord Ganesha, seashells, stones, animals, even dirt.

"The sacred is often found in the mundane," Thompson said. "What the hands became to me were mini-altars."

Each photograph is accompanied by short stories, remarks or poems that personalize and enhance each picture. A piece called "Helen T" captures the wrinkled hands of an old woman holding eggs.

"After almost three decades of living on a chicken ranch, I couldn't begin to count the eggs I've handled," Helen Thompson, Marvelle's late mother-in-law, writes. "I even had to collect and grade eggs on the morning of my wedding. Poached eggs on toast is my very favorite egg dish."

"Casey R" shows a young woman's hands resting on an exercise bike.

"Cycling is an outward expression of the inner strength I did not know I possessed," San Bernardino-based spinning instructor Casey Riedell writes. "My hands are the final action of an internal decision to push myself beyond my comfort zone."

Each woman's hands are unique -- artistic statements in themselves. Whether they are worn, cracked, manicured or youthful, each pair of hands echo the stages of a woman's life, what Thompson calls the "maiden, mother, crone cycle."

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Thompson, who co-created the photographic collection with friend Susan Kullmann, spent almost three years working on "Blessed."

"She has the computer expertise," Thompson said about Kullmann, who is a research scholar at UCLA's Center for the Study of Women and managing director of DoctorGeek, a Claremont-based Web development, computer training and consulting firm. "It's a nice blend of right brain and left brain. I'm not a techy person, but she is."

Kullmann and Thompson took hundreds of photos, scanned and edited them in Photoshop. They chose to enhance and touch-up pieces, cropping photos and turning some from color into black and white.

"It was an attempt to bring out the best feeling in the image," Kullmann said. "Some of the manipulations in Photoshop help you enhance an image."

Thompson hopes viewers will appreciate the beauty and variety of women and what they give us on a daily basis.

"These hands are so indicative of their deepness, their compassion, everything," she said.

Thompson and Kullmann hope to publish a book based on the exhibition. "Blessed Are These Hands" will be on display through April 23.

ART PREVIEW

"BLESSED ARE THESE HANDS"

What: Photography exhibition depicting hands of women holding symbols of what they consider "sacred."

When: Opening reception, 6 to 9 tonight

Where: Cal Poly Pomona Downtown Center, 300 W. Second St., Pomona

Cost: Free

Information: (909) 469-0080

Note: The "Blessed Are These Hands" exhibition is part of the monthly Second Saturday Artwalk, featuring receptions at galleries on Second, Thomas, Third and Main streets.

ALSO AT THE ARTWALK

"Connections": Artists Joe Forkan and Crystal Yachin Lee explore the use of multiple images and the effect that multiples have on how we read and understand images. SCA Project Gallery, 281 S. Thomas St. No. 104 (basement), Pomona. (909) 620-5481.

"Corroded Diagram Outlet": Drawings and paintings by Pomona artist Juan Thorpe and Cal Poly Pomona fine arts student Brent Harada. SCA Project Gallery, 281 S. Thomas St. No. 104 (basement), Pomona. (909) 620-5481.

"God Gone Wild": 20 artists explore God, Jesus Christ and spirituality in humorous, serious and off-beat ways. Popztlan Gallery, 256 S. Main St., Pomona. (909) 620-0051.

"Women's Werk: The Dignity of Craft": Two ceramic artists, who exemplify the modernist spirit, began their creative careers during the 1920s. This exhibition contrasts the artistic accomplishments of Susi Singer and Marguerite Wildenhain. Special lecture on Wildenhain by Billie Sessions at 4 p.m. American Museum of Ceramic Art, 340 S. Garey Ave., Pomona. (909) 865-3146.

ELSEWHERE

"Women International Month": Exhibition featuring the works of 14 women artists. Latino Art Museum, 250 W. First St. Suite 100, Claremont. (909) 447-6699.


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