

DEBORAH KELLER-RIHN

The Evolution of a Feminine Mythology



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Deborah Keller-Rihn (San Antonio, TX)
The Evolution of a Feminine Mythology

This exhibition is made possible in part by the St. Mary's University Art and Art Education department, the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Luis J. Blume Academic Library.

Exhibition opening and closing dates:

September 13th, 2024 – October 13th, 2024

Curated by James A. Joffe, M.F.A.

Associate Professor of Art & Art Education

St. Mary's University

Louis J. Blume Library Art Gallery

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Karen at the Aquaducts, hand-colored Photograph, 12" x 18", 2008

Meet the Artist Reception: Friday, September 20, 2024, 4 – 5:30 pm

Viewing hours:

Mon – Thu, 8 am -11 pm;

Fri, 8 am – 5 pm;

Sat, 12 pm – 8 pm;

Sun, Noon – 11 pm

Free and open to the public



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COVER ART: Ritual of Protection,
hand-painted photograph, 10' x 10'

The Evolution of a Personal Mythology

I have been more or less obsessed with the idea of the Divine Feminine since I read Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman* in the late 1990s. I have always liked drawing, painting, and photographing the female form, but reading this book cemented in my mind the idea that the Divine could be represented as female, which was common in ancient cultures.

As a child, I was shown a film about *Our Lady of Lourdes*, who had appeared to St. Bernadette in 1858; and I longed to have this vision. There was a small grotto near St. Xavier Church in La Feria, Texas, where I grew up, and I would regularly go there to pray. I would imagine that the statue of the Virgin was alive, and it would seem to me that her eyes would move. At Mass, my attention would always be on the statue of the Virgin Mary. As a teenager, I became very involved at my church and was taken under the wing by a nun from Incarnate Word. She invited me to attend charismatic prayer meetings, and I read many books and was spiritually enlivened. Within this cultural context, I received the gift of the spirit and envisioned a woman made of white light bathing me in waves of energy. She told me, "You are love, and you are loved." Throughout my life, I have been guided by this vision in my art, spiritual readings, and travels.



While God may not be male or female, I believe that how we visualize and conceptualize the Divine has real consequences for ordinary women and the power and agency they exercise within any given society. As a single mother of two daughters, I was constantly amazed by their intelligence, strength, and beauty and how this reality conflicted with cultural stereotypes about women. I sought to convey this vision of beauty, resilience, and spirituality in my photographs of them and of other women as well.

In this show, I am tracing the development of my work from 2000 to the present. Examples from various bodies of work such as *Symbolic Transformations*, *the 21 Aspects of Tara*, *Namaste*, *the Lovely Kolam*, and *Traces of Perception* to works in later shows such as *Glimpses of Eternity* and *Lone Star Reverie* show how my ideas have developed as well as my experimental approach to photography and photographic presentation. My work conveys a search for the Divine Feminine and the integration of the worldly and the transcendent. Indeed, the spiritual manifests in matter as I attempt to demonstrate how beauty can transform consciousness and enlighten a divided world. ~DKR (www.deborahkellerrihn.com)



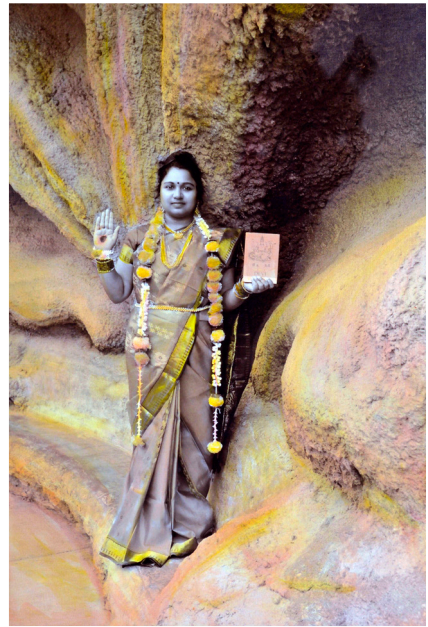
Mystical Guardians, hand-colored
photograph, 12" x 12", 1996

Mystical Guardians

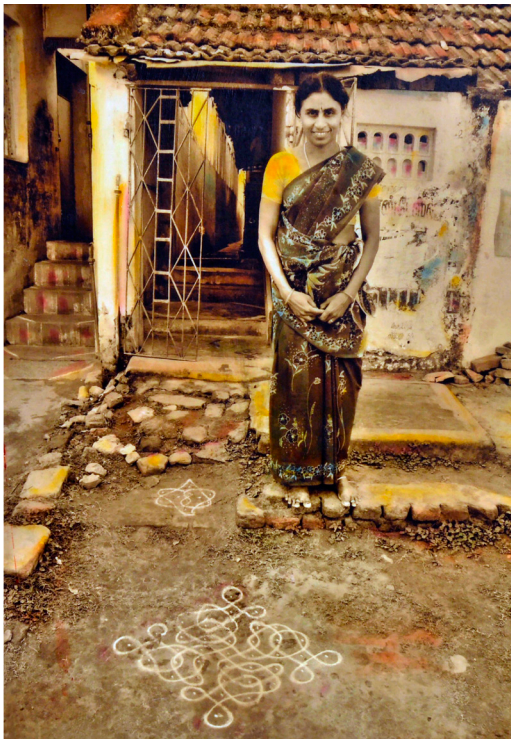
I started my photography career by photographing my daughters, my constant companions and inspiration. In this photograph, Lauren and Katie are modeling in skates upon the roots of trees at Brackenridge Park. These early photographs were taken with a Rollei, printed in black and white in a darkroom, and hand-colored since I am a painter as well as a photographer.

Savitri

The central image in this show is a portrait I did of my friend Yashoda, who is from South India. We are portraying her as the goddess Savitri, who is the daughter of Savitr, the Sun God. In the sacred Hindu text, the Mahabharata, Savitri, uses her wits to trick Yama, the Lord of Death, into allowing her husband, Satyavan, to live. This story is an allegory about the power of conjugal love over death. Savitri is also the name of an epic poem written by the revolutionary yogi and poet Sri Aurobindo, and the text describes the central role of the feminine in spiritual evolution.



*Savitri: Goddess of the Sun,
hand-painted photograph, 2024*



The Lovely Kolam

In this series, photographs of women making kolams were printed and attached to cradle boards colored with powdered paints and coated with encaustic wax. This gives a dreamy effect. Kolams are a transient art form created mostly by women all over India in front of their homes, temples, and stores. They are made with coarse rice flour that is sometimes colored and sometimes white. These elaborate geometric patterns are drawn on the ground every morning to honor the goddess, Laxmi, who is thought to bring beauty and prosperity into their lives.

*Girl in Blue Sari with Kolam,
hand-colored with encaustic, 14" x 18", 2015*



*Nadia as the Kanakavarna Tara,
Golden Liberating One,*
hand-painted photograph on canvas, 20" x 30", 2006
From the Collection of Raul Servin

The 21 Aspects of Tara

Tara is the Tibetan Goddess of Compassion. This series of photographs is my attempt to visualize the 21 Aspects of the goddess described in the book *Tara: The Feminine Divine* by Bokar Rinpoche. I found this book when I attended a White Tara initiation in Boulder, Colorado, led by Tashi Wangchuk, Rabkar Wangchuk's brother. Rabkar Wangchuk is an artist and Tibetan monk I sponsored to come to America and was my teacher. Tara, the Tibetan Goddess of compassion, is an enlightened being regarded as the Mother of all Buddhas. She is especially associated with long life and wisdom. In the West, we are familiar with Mother Mary, whose boundless love and compassion qualities resemble those of Tara. It is said that Tara was a real woman before she was a Goddess. The story goes that when Tara was noticed as devout, the monks suggested that she pray for a male form in her next life. Offended by the implication that to be female is somehow inferior, she vowed to forever remain in a feminine form to help all sentient beings. She can be regarded as one of the earliest feminists.

Satchitanda

Satchitananda translates from Sanskrit as Sat (Truth) + Chit (Consciousness) + Ananda (Bliss) and describes the subjective experience of the ultimate, unchanging reality in Hinduism called Brahman. This group of photographs attempts to describe this state of consciousness in terms of my own experiences in India. I layered photographs with pictures of the highly textured walls in Pondicherry.



Blue Kali, layered photograph, 12" x 16", 2020

Lauren, at 26: Protector of the Environment

This image of a multi-armed goddess was taken on the San Antonio River near the Blue Star Arts Complex when Lauren was 26 years old. Lauren is portraying a goddess whose many arms and serious demeanor are necessary to protect the environment. My daughter has a PhD in Eco-Systems Services and works for the Nature Conservancy as the director of coastal resiliency for the State of Texas.

Lauren, at 26, hand-painted photograph on canvas, 36" x 48", 2008

Namaste



Grandmother from a Village near Aurangabad, hand-painted altar box, 24" x 26", 2013

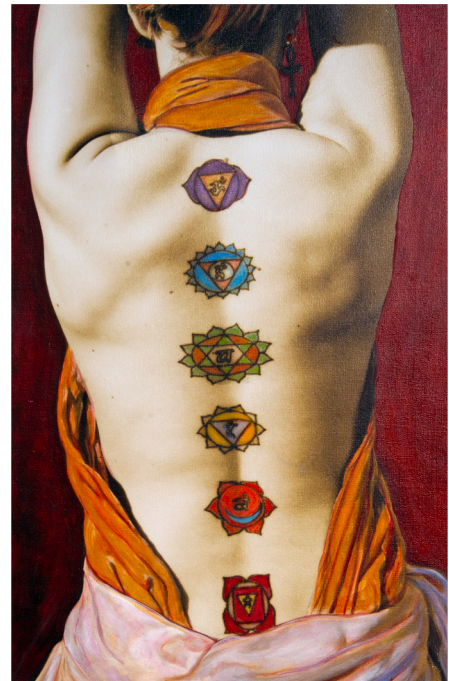
These photographs were taken in 2012 on my first trip to India. Like most Westerners traveling to India, I sought a spiritual experience. I was completely taken aback by the colorful, chaotic swirl of life I encountered. Evidence left from thousands of years of spiritual practice and temples on every corner honoring multitudes of deities. Still, today, religious rituals are part of the fabric of everyday life. Of course, the temples were extraordinary, and I was very lucky to take a pilgrimage to some of the holiest sites in India. The deeper spirituality to me, however was found in the faces and eyes of the people. I was met with warmth, generosity, curiosity, and kindness. People opened their hearts and their homes to me. I discovered that spirituality was to be found in this attitude of reverence and humble service, not in some ephemeral realm.

I wanted to celebrate and honor the people who had treated me so kindly and to present the portraits in a way that was distinctly Indian. The hand-made look of roadside shrines inspires the painting on the boxes, and the colors and designs came from the photos themselves.

Chakra Portraits

Chakra means “wheel” and refers to energy points in the body. Chakras are thought to be spinning disks of energy that should stay “open” and aligned, as they correspond to bundles of nerves, major organs, and areas of our energetic body that affect our emotional and physical well-being.

When I was studying intensely about chakras, a beautiful woman showed up at my studio. When I told her what I was studying, she showed me the tattoos she had on her back and modeled for me the next day. I printed the images on canvas and hand colored them. This began a series of works about tattoos, how they relate to the body, and how they are used for self-definition.



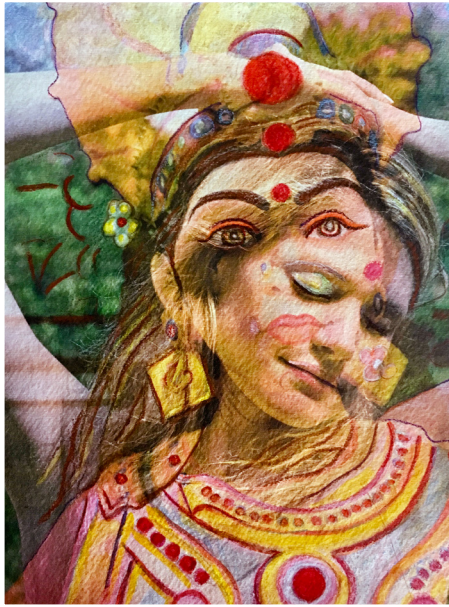
Daniella with Chakras, hand-painted
Photograph on canvas, 18" x 24", 2016



Soldadera

These pictures were taken at Blue Star Arts Complex for a show I curated at Centro Cultural Aztlan called Soldadera. The model is Liza Ybarra, a singer I met at the Edgewood Fine Arts Academy while I was the district's Fine Arts Facilitator. Liza inspired this exhibit, which was held to commemorate the release of her DVD, also called Soldadera. Soldaderas are women who fought alongside the men in the Mexican Revolution and are symbols of feminine strength and endurance. I took these photos with a photographer, Annette Xuchitl Landry. They were printed on canvas and hand-colored.

Liza, as a Soldadera, hand-painted
Photograph on canvas, 20" x 30", 2013



Traces of Perception: Glimpses of a Life Divine

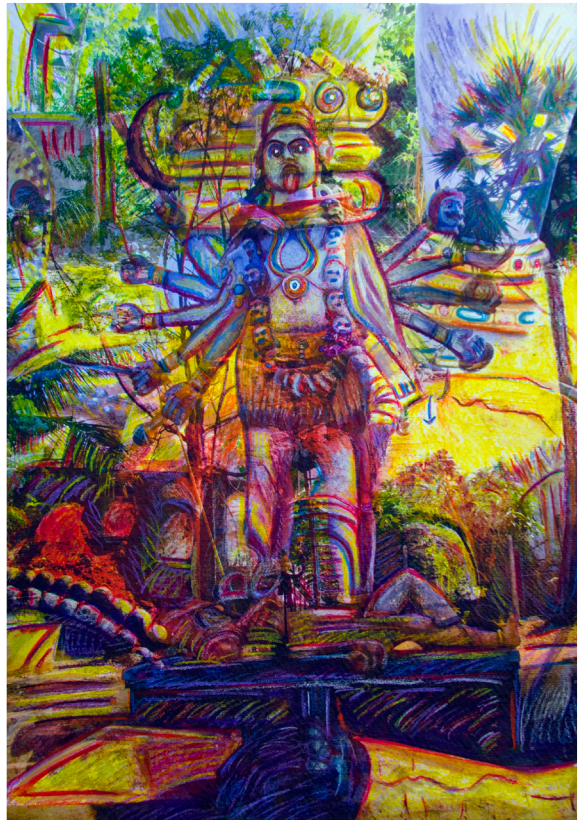
These images are printed on handmade paper from the Sri Aurobindo Papermaking Studio in Pondicherry, India. I used Photoshop's various blending modes to create surreal, poetic effects that are further enhanced with watercolors and pencil colors.

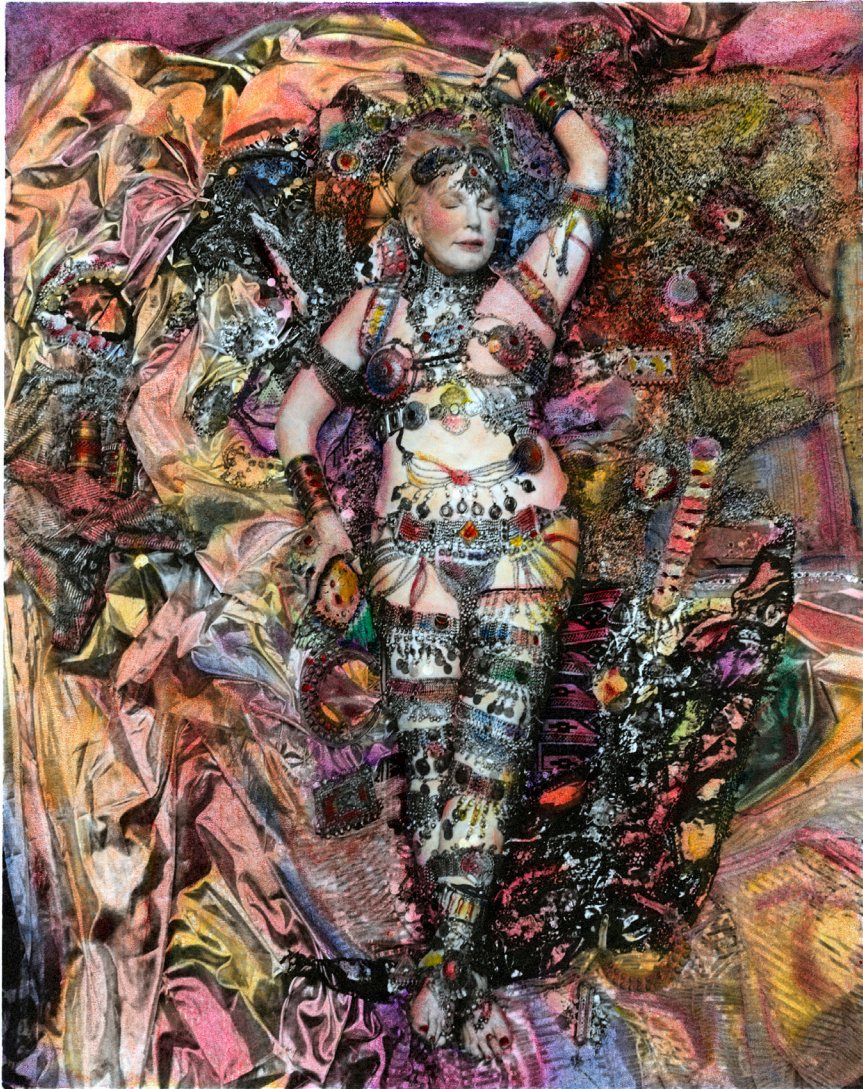
Katie as an Indian Goddess, photograph on handmade paper, 2017

Kali Maa

Kali Maa is the Hindu goddess of darkness, destruction, and the power of life and death. She is also a symbol of the Universal Mother. She who gives life can take it away. Kali is considered the most powerful of the Hindu goddesses. Her energy is wild, powerful, and intensely loving. It is a layered photograph hand-colored with colored pencils and watercolors.

Kali Maa, mixed media layered photograph, 16 x 12, 2020





Joann at 65: The Feminine Divine

Joann at 65, hand-colored
photograph, 16" x 20", 2000-24

Joann is my good friend who collects art and all things beautiful. She has a Collection of Afghan jewelry, and it was her idea that I do this portrait of her covered in jewelry. I painstakingly placed each piece of jewelry on her body and photographed her from above. The photograph was printed in the darkroom and hand-colored.



The Feminine Version of Ganesha
hand-painted altar box, 24" x 26", 2013

The Feminine Version of Ganesha

I took many pictures in India at various spiritual sites such as Ellora, Khajuraho, and Ajanta. I used a surrealist treatment in Photoshop that made the images look very 3D and placed the photos into lightboxes. The three in this show have feminine subjects.

The Mother and Our Lady of Lourdes,
layered photograph, 12" x 18", 2024

The Mother and Our Lady Lourdes

This work was created at the old Lone Star Brewery, now tagged and falling into disrepair. I liked the combination of disintegration and the creative enthusiasm created by the graffiti. It seems like a metaphor for life continually changing and transmuting itself through chaos and entropy. I took my little box of symbolic objects to this place, placed them within this environment, and layered the images in Photoshop using different blending modes.

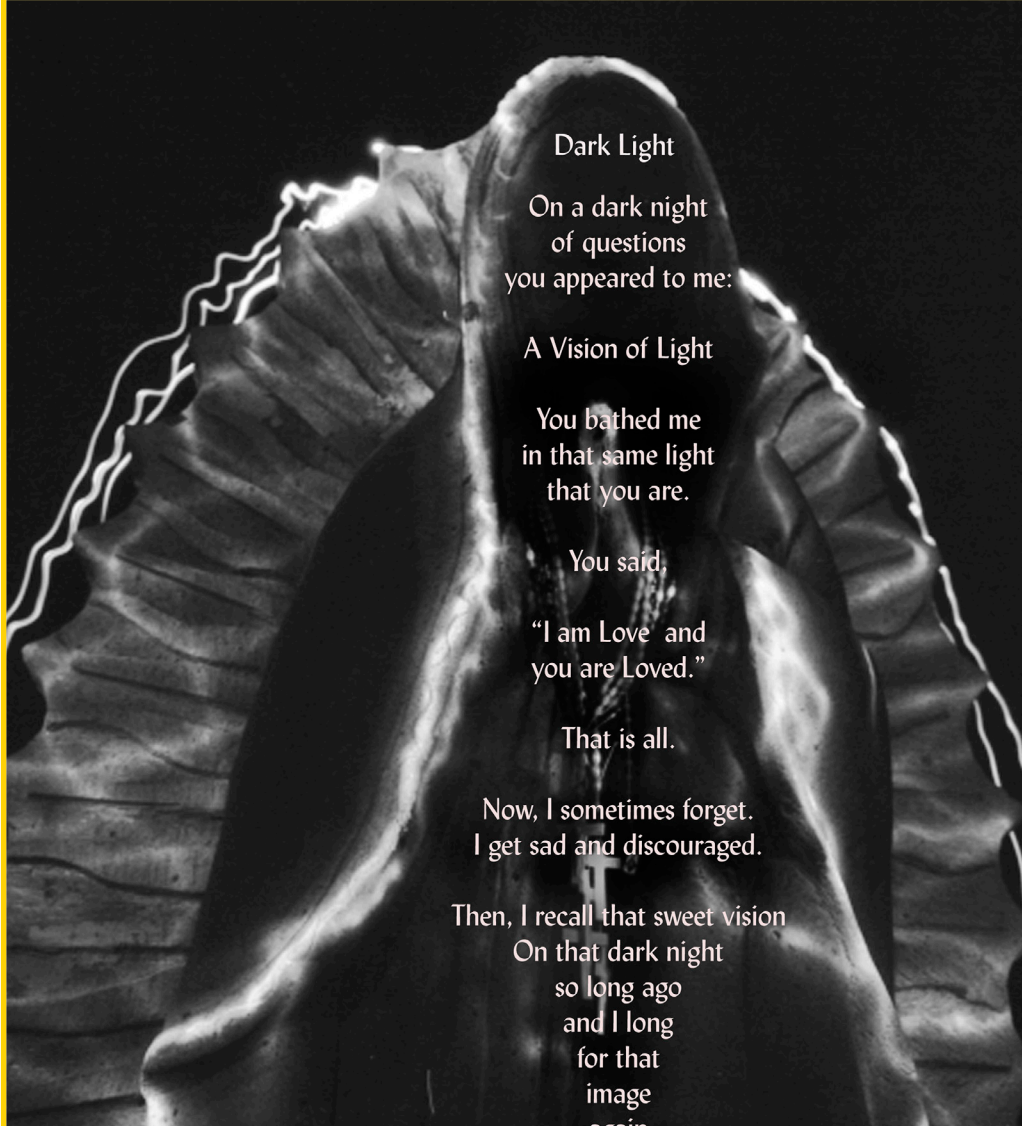


Glimpses of Eternity

This project results from a year of taking photographs on the streets of San Antonio. I wanted to find the spiritual and the eternal in the place where I live, to ground myself and fully accept the reality of my life. San Antonio is my hometown: a beautiful city filled with fascinating people and amazing places as interesting as anywhere else. The images I took were layered in Photoshop and combined using various blending modes, painting one image upon another to create images of simultaneous realities. This work was partly inspired by photos I had taken in India and a body of work called Traces of Perception, where I started layering images. I realized that I could do the same thing in my hometown that I had done in India. There is spirituality everywhere.



Our Lady at Mission San Juan, layered photograph, 12" x 18", 2022



Dark Light

On a dark night
of questions
you appeared to me:

A Vision of Light

You bathed me
in that same light
that you are.

You said,

“I am Love and
you are Loved.”

That is all.

Now, I sometimes forget.
I get sad and discouraged.

Then, I recall that sweet vision
On that dark night
so long ago
and I long
for that
image
again

DEBORAH KELLER-RIHN

Deborah Keller-Rihn is an artist, teacher, curator, mentor, arts organizer, and cultural innovator who sees art as a spiritual practice and values creativity as a powerful tool for personal healing and cultural transformation. Deborah Keller-Rihn is a multi-talented artist whose primary medium is photography. She usually hand-colors her photographs and enjoys experimenting with different photographic techniques and innovative ways to present her work.

Deborah has been working in the arts for over thirty years and has helped to shape the cultural landscape of San Antonio through her work as a fine arts facilitator in Edgewood School District, assistant curator of education at the San Antonio Museum of Art, program director at Bihl Haus Arts, arts program manager at Centro Cultural Aztlan, and as an independent curator and organizer. In her teaching career, she worked as a teacher at every level, from elementary to college, teaching art, photography, humanities, reading, and English. She is the director of the Blue Star Arts Collective in the Upstairs Studios at the Blue Star Arts Complex, where she has



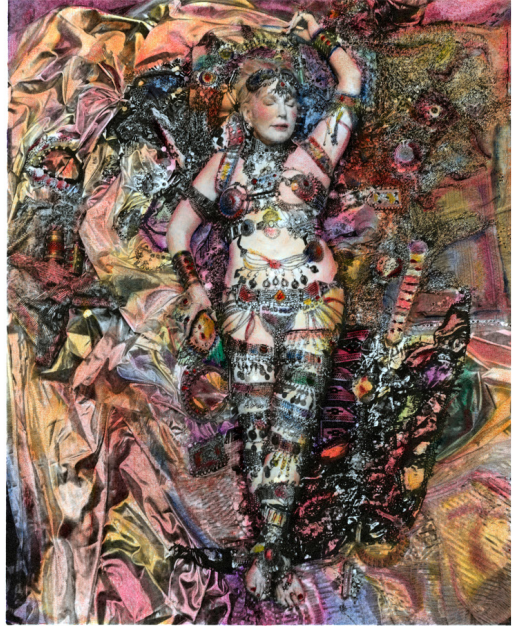
been having monthly openings for almost thirty years. Deborah's studio practice has been central to all her endeavors in the arts, and she is committed to creating art and developing the arts community.

Deborah has a BA in Humanities, where she graduated magna cum laude with honors, all-level teaching credentials in Art from UT Austin, and a master's degree in art from Texas A & M Kingsville.

Deborah has made four trips to India and plans to return soon to continue her studies at the Sri Aurobindo Center of Advanced Research in Pondicherry and create new works of art centered on the idea of the feminine divine.

www.deborahkellerrihn.com

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