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Web Posted: 09/02/2009 12:00 CDT

Ingredients mix in photo exhibit

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By **Steve Bennett** - Express-News

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Brianna Burnett's new series of photographs explores two of life's necessities: food and myth.

The 29-year-old artist, who grew up in the aptly named Levelland, west of Lubbock, has been dealing with her Texas family history in her work, including a series of tintypes, for several years.

Burnett's new imagery, featured in an exhibition called Implied Metaphor at Studio106B, is a logical next step.

"I started looking at mythology and folklore anywhere I could find it," she says. "I'm interested in the process of storytelling and how we pass down our stories, how the transition is made from your perceptions to mine. The idea that my interpretation of a story might be very different from yours."

Connections gradually were made to food, and Burnett, an avid student of anthropology, began scouring the literature -- a battered copy of Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat's A History of Food rests on her kitchen table -- for stories that "recognized food as part of our need to celebrate life."

"There's such a difference in the historical perspective of food and the one we have now," Burnett says. "It was revered."

Bending for Her to Reach is a dark, meditative work that calls to mind Renaissance painting. Its two main ingredients are images of the Mother and Child and cherry blossoms. It was inspired by an early Christian story Burnett encountered about Joseph and Mary. They are traveling, and Mary asks Joseph to bend down a cherry branch so that she might reach the fruit. He says something to the effect of, "Why don't you get whomever got you with child to bend the branch?" Jesus, in the womb, hears this and bends the branch down for his mother. Joseph is humbled -- and probably freaked out.

Another image, titled In My Garden Grows Eternity, was inspired by a Chinese myth of a goddess guarding the peach orchard where the gods come every 3,000 years for celestial sustenance. The guard's monkey, however, sneaks in and eats all the peaches. Wrath ensues.

"In every culture, there is a life-sustaining theme of food, the growing of it, the bounty of it, that it is to be celebrated and enjoyed and worshipped," Burnett says. "Today we seem to be bombarded with moral questions of what to eat and what not to eat."

Burnett's new digital inkjet prints have multiple layers of scans -- of fabrics, paintings, plants and, of course, fruits and vegetables. The process inculcates the work with richness and depth.

"I call them digital collages, although I'm not really fond of that name," she says. "There are layers of storytelling, references to history and culture."

Burnett, who teaches photography courses at the Southwest School of Art and Craft and is an adjunct professor at Northwest Vista College, moved to San Antonio about a year ago. After teaching elementary school in Katy, the Austin College graduate spent a year in Nepal as a photojournalist. When her visa ran out, Burnett decided to pursue a master's of fine arts degree, which she earned in 2008 from Texas Tech. Then she was looking for a place to light.

"My boyfriend and I decided to visit San Antonio, and we came on the night of the first Luminaria (downtown arts celebration)," she says. "There were all these musicians and dancers in the streets, and projections on the walls of the Alamo. I said, 'Let's live here.'"

Burnett, a vegetarian, is not much of a chef. But, she admits, her new series "has got me into the kitchen a little bit."

Implied Metaphor opens with a reception from 6 to 9 p.m. Thursday at Studio106B in the Blue Star Arts Complex. A First Friday celebration is set for 6 p.m. Friday. The show runs through Sept. 30 and can be viewed by calling 806-554-5723.

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