

# Fire dance sets PDX ablaze

sets PDX

Photos by Sam Krause Clackamas Print

Bimonthly Fire Dance Jam brings forth crowds on the Portland streets

## Elizabeth Tobey

The Clackamas Print

Streaks of fire and pounding drums filled the night air as a crowd of people gathered at the end of Salmon Street for Portland's bimonthly Fire Dance Jam and Drum Circle.

Kids in leather and mohawks joined dread-headed drummers, and mothers set up folding chairs for their children. Cans of fuel lined the cement area underneath the I-5 overpass as about 20 dancers milled around preparing to burn.

Accompanied by the rhythms from the drum circle the evening included performances with a variety of fire toys including poi, staff, sword, baton, devil sticks, fire fingers, and hula-hoop, as well as fire painting and fire breathing.

Now viewed as an exotic form of entertainment, fire dancing has roots in Polynesian and New Zealand native cultures.

The traditions of the Maori people in New Zealand offer the main foundation of modern fire dance. Originally they used a small bag to carry the egg of the Moa, a large flightless bird which is now extinct.

Then they began putting stones inside the bags and adding longer

ropes to use for exercise and martial arts training. Swinging the bags, or poi, improved hand and wrist flexibility, coordination and strength.

The Maori people did not originally use poi with fire. Instead the poi were used as percussive instruments and combined with dancing and chanting to tell stories, similar to the way Hula dancing uses hand symbols for storytelling.

It's not clear exactly when people began setting poi on fire. But now, instead of being woven from natural fibers, poi are usually constructed from synthetic material, such as Kevlar wick, with a chain or cord and loops for fingers to hold.

The traditional Hawaiian or Samoan aialao, or knife dance, has also been integrated into modern fire dancing. The dance involves furiously twirling the nifo oti, or war knife, and was used to prepare warriors for battle.

Letuli Olo Misilagi was the first to add fire to a knife dance after being inspired by a fire-eater and baton twirler in San Francisco. Now it is a common performance piece at Hawaiian luau and for tourist entertainment.

These days, fire enthusiasts will take just about anything they can soak in lighter fluid and find a way

to dance with it.

In the Portland area probably the best place to see a wide variety of fire performances is the Fire Jam and Drum Circle that takes place on the first and third Sundays of the month where Salmon Street dead-ends into the east side of the river.

Shireen Press and Delpha Turley started the jam about four years ago.

"I called about 30 of my friends that danced and said 'let's play,'" said Press. "That was almost four years ago and people still come down every time."

Starting at dusk drummers, dancers and onlookers gather for an evening of fun and fire.

"It's a good inspiration to come down and see other people dance," said Kyla Broderick, who danced early in the evening.

Press still dances regularly at the jam, and she and Turley both teach private lessons in their homes. They also produced an instructional video available through their company, Pele's Element, [www.peleselement.com](http://www.peleselement.com).

For the 21-and-over crowd there are often fire performances at clubs and bars. Dante's and Embers regularly feature fire dancers.

Also, the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) hosts events



ABOVE: Argon Vancouver experimented with a fire wheel at the most recent Fire Jam in Portland. LEFT: Fire breathing is a very dangerous art, also took place at the jam. The breathers use lamp oil, because it has no taste and keeps the flame white. Gas would burn the breathers' faces.

which often include fire.

"After Memorial Day, the SCA has about one event a weekend," said Jeff Kyser, who was dancing and working as a fire safety at the Portland Jam.

And for those eager to learn, southeast Portland's Euphoria Studios, [www.thecircle.net/network.com](http://www.thecircle.net/network.com), offers weekly classes for beginning to advanced poi, taught by Charisse Renee. The classes use practice poi and for insurance reasons, fire is not

taught at the studio.

Other resources for instructional information and fire equipment: Serious Juggling, located in southeast Portland and at [www.seriousjuggling.com](http://www.seriousjuggling.com), and The Home of Poi Fire Twirling at [www.homeofpoi.com](http://www.homeofpoi.com).

"I guess I'm a pyromaniac," says Argon Vancouver, who creates sculptures of his own fire toys. "But I just love the people who do it. It's a fun thing to get together and do."

## Student photographer's works display natural beauty

### CJ Ciaramella

The Clackamas Print

It's only Becca Blevins' first year studying photography at Clackamas Community College, but the young student is already turning heads, both at the college and beyond.

Blevins recently had a few of her photos displayed in a gallery during First Thursday, a monthly joint-exhibition put on by many of the galleries in the Pearl District. She also has an upcoming exhibition at the Twin Paradox coffee shop, located in the Sellwood District. Her photos will be on display there and for sale throughout the month of May.

In person, Becca Blevins is bright, smiling and genuinely excited about her work. She was more than happy to show her pictures, carefully spreading some of her favorites across the table and explaining their finer points. There's no trace of "snobby artist" to be found. She credits some of her enthusiasm to her teacher, Smith Elliot.

"She gets you inspired," she said.

There seems to be no shortage of inspiration, though. Blevins' folder is thick with prints and contact sheets of her photos. Her work shows a natural eye for composition and tra-

ditional photography technique, but it also shows a willingness to experiment with form. Many of her photos make use of complicated tricks like layering and double-exposures.

Blevins was originally drawn to

photography because she found it to be a unique art form, which allowed her a much different freedom than others, like painting.

"It's about creating a little world that people can step into," she said.

Whatever it's about, it appears she has found her muse. The "little worlds" that Blevins creates showcase a budding talent. Her black-and-white photos are eye-catching and run a gamut of emotions - from

moody to serene to happy.

Blevins says a common theme running through her work is the relationship between nature and humanity.

"What is our place with nature and how far are we removed from it?" Blevins pondered.

Her photography explores these questions through the use of contrasting images of people and nature - a fern lazily draped across a human back, emulating the spine, or a flower placed parallel to a human eye.

Blevins' plans after she leaves Clackamas are still up in the air, but she says that she is thinking about double-enrolling at PSU and Mt. Hood Community College. She chose Mt. Hood for its photography program, but said she prefers PSU for further education.

The young photographer's portfolio is full for the moment, however. Besides her classes, she has other projects on the horizon.

"I already got asked to do the weddings," she said, "and I'm getting paid."

She said she enjoys playing "business person" at the moment, making order forms and other sheets.

If her current achievements and workload are any indication, her future may be looking bright indeed for Blevins.



Becca Blevins Contributed photo

Student and photographer Becca Blevins bases much of her work on the relationship between nature and humanity, as in this self portrait of Blevins, in which a flower emulates the human eye.