

Taking the Naughty Out of Nudity

By Heather Knight
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Befriend Mona Kuhn, and you'll probably wind up posing nude. You'll probably wind up in sexy black-and-white photographs. And the photos of your body — in all its naked glory — will probably wind up on the walls of galleries around the world.

THE ARTS

Don't fret. Kuhn trains her camera lens on hands, shoulders, elbows — nothing Playboy-esque. And she makes her subjects look very good.

Her latest exhibition, "Gestures," is on display at Palo Alto's Modernbook/Gallery 494 and shows the alluring fruits of her quest for "lots of bodies, lots of body parts."

Kuhn, 31, of San Francisco, developed her comfort with nudity growing up on the beaches of São Paulo, Brazil. She moved to the

United States to attend school, earning her bachelor's degree from Ohio State University in 1994 and her master's of fine art from San Francisco's Academy of Art in 1996. She's had solo shows in San Francisco, Seattle, Germany and Brazil.

She works out of a studio in the Mission District, but spends much of her time frolicking on the beach with those who've agreed to bare it all for her art. She usually photographs people she's known for at least five years.

"I don't think of them as models," she said. "I think of them as friends. I always send them proof sheets so they know I'm not focusing on unexpected places. There's a lot of trust there."

The trust stems from Kuhn's displeasure with in-your-face erotic photography.

"What I don't like is the blatant naked images," she said. "I'm just tired of the super-focused, homoerotic images of women on sand

dunes."

Bryan Yedinak, who curates the Palo Alto show, first saw Kuhn's work in a Australian photography magazine and was immediately enthralled.

"Her work is exactly the kind of thing I want to represent — it's very sensual, personal work, compelling and all-around naturally beautiful stuff," he said.

Kuhn likes to leave just about everything to the imagination and picks subjects with an androgynous, atemporal, classical look. She stands very close to her subjects to develop an intimacy during the shoots and usually fills the frame with their body parts.

With the closeness — both physically and emotionally — between Kuhn and her subjects, she's able to portray their personalities and habits in her work.

"Nikki's Hands" shows the busy hands of a friend who's constantly fiddling with things. "Sa-

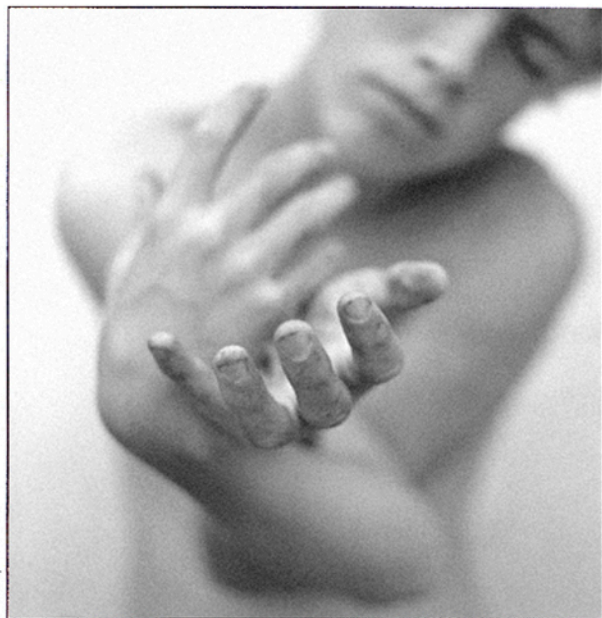
On Display

Mona Kuhn's "Gestures" is on display through April 19 at Modernbook/Gallery 494, 494 University Ave., Palo Alto. Gallery hours are 11 a.m.-10 p.m. daily. (650) 327-6325.

dra" shows a woman's open mouth, her shoulder and her clawing hand. "Playing" shows a woman's torso with a shadow of her hand on her belly.

"What I'm trying to do is focus on gestures, on metaphors of the body," Kuhn said. "Each person does different things — I watch how they move; I observe."

She always gives prints of her photos to her friends and said they're generally pleased with the results. But not everyone's eager to show off their entree into the world of erotic art.



"Gestures," an exhibition of San Francisco photographer Mona Kuhn's nudes, is on display at Palo Alto's Modernbook/Gallery 494.

"Some of them frame the prints and give them to their girlfriends," Kuhn said. "But some are shy, and they just keep them in a box under the bed."

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