

Golden States of Grace

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Arts Hub

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Rick Nahmias' exhibition of photographs currently on view at the [Fullerton Museum Center](#) in Fullerton, California, [Golden States of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited](#), reminds us that there are many ways to define family. The disinherited that he shares with us are part of our culture: those we have pushed to the margins, but are managing, through their faith, to hold on and survive. In many of the groups he has chosen, there is a clear struggle going on: with identity, history, and American culture and society. Some battles are more easily winnable than others. All are more than worth the effort.



An image from Rick Nahmias' 'states'.
[Photo: Rick Nahmias]

This stunning set of images documents multiple groups engaged in living through their religious beliefs. But these are not people from the rank and file middle class. Nahmias' lens brings us respectfully inside and up close to diverse and representative people struggling with the everyday, in body, soul, mind and spirit. It is an exhibition that looks at religion not as a monolith from the top down, but as an empowering, life-affirming tool that works from the bottom up. It also tells many stories about the family of man (and woman) kind.

California is the golden state. And Nahmias has criss-crossed it to engage with Latina sex workers worshipping St. Death, a Buddhist community in San Quentin, a Mormon congregation of the deaf, a transsexual gospel choir, a Jewish half-way house for addicts, a Muslim group struggling with assimilation, Native Americans holding onto their ancient culture, and a breakaway group of Catholic nuns, devoted to social justice, among others. There are eleven such groups in all. These are the 'families' on view at Fullerton: bound together by beliefs, connected by the spiritual path they are walking, in a kind of visual dialogue with each other and with us as viewer.

Rick Nahmias is no stranger to giving us windows to those we might not ordinarily see. A recent [major project](#) dealt with migrant workers in California. He is the inheritor of a long and distinguished line of American photojournalists/artists who have used their camera to make visible the invisible and who remind us again and again that we are only as strong as our most fragile links, and that we will either all survive together, or risk not surviving at all.

[Edward R. Murrow](#) long ago broadcast one of his most powerful documentaries one American Thanksgiving evening in the '60s, a film about our [Harvest of Shame](#): the plight of the migrant worker in the fields of plenty. Before that, Dorothea Lange's [images](#) from the '30s also bore witness to countless American workers during the Great Depression. There is something of that inspiration infusing Nahmias' work: he captures that sense of urgency in his own examination of that subject some seventy years after Lange, and forty after Murrow. In the same sensitive and profound way, he continues to help us see the unseen in his latest work. The focus this time is on those trying to hold onto their culture while they nurture their spirit.

Nahmias is a storyteller, as were Lange, Murrow, and the whole Murrow tradition that followed. The stories he tells are American stories; his people live on the edge, but are wholeheartedly part of the American experience.

Golden States of Grace is full of celebratory images. They are not images of ruin or despair. They are images of hope, courage, and determination and are the images from a welcome insider – non-exploitive, intimate, clear, inspirational and illuminating. Each gives us a glimpse into real moments in lively communities. They listen, they do not preach. They reveal, they are not staged or posed. We are welcomed into their circles, but not as voyeurs. These images glow.

Challah is a particularly poignant image of a group from the congregation Belt T'Shuvah, pictured as they are about to break bread and greet Shabbat. Belt' T'Shuvah opens its doors each Friday evening to those struggling with addictions: drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling. Suitcase is a poignant reminder of time and culture, past and present. The small case holds the precious accoutrements for the Federated Indians of [Graton Rancheria](#) to perform their 'Acorn' ceremony: a chance to give thanks, originally for a harvest, and now for surviving and remembering. The small group are all descended from the fourteen surviving members of the original tribe. It is a suitcase of memory, determination, and culture that will not be denied. In the image that depicts the Feast of the Eid ul-Fitr, [Cham](#) Muslims, refugees from the genocide led by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in 1975, celebrate the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Some of these families have been in California since the 1980's, but their culture and language are rapidly losing ground to assimilation. But in this captured moment, they are happy.

These families, real and constituted, have connected their past to their present. They are the fortunate ones: they know who they are, and are actively engaged in never forgetting.

Golden States of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited will be on exhibition until January 14th at the Fullerton Museum Center.