

[TRAVEL & RECREATION]  
FITNESS

## DANCING ON AIR

AT ORANGE COUNTY AERIAL ARTS,  
RUBY KAREN IS TAKING FITNESS  
TO NEW HEIGHTS.

By Shaleek Blackburn  
Photography by Melissa Valladares

If you've ever wondered what it would feel like to be suspended in air, elegantly twirling on a ceiling-to-floor sliver of fabric (or tissu, as the French dub it)—Cirque du Soleil-style—you can jet over to Orange County Aerial Arts in Costa Mesa to find out. It's the brainchild of studio co-director Ruby Karen, who opened the venue in 2009 and recently expanded into a grander space to support her no-holds-barred effort to introduce the high-flying activity, which relies on the use of hoops, hammocks, tightropes and trapezes, to local fitness buffs.

"You are hanging or using some part of your body to perform an exercise or to execute shapes and forms," says Karen, a diminutive dancer, former bodybuilding champ, choreographer and teacher who spent years flying around the world—from her home country of the Philippines, where she mastered ballet, to center stage of the mesmerizing, stunt-filled Las Vegas production, *Le Rêve*—before grounding herself in O.C.'s performing arts scene. "You are hanging onto it, or you're using some part of your body to do something—to do an exercise."

Once considered taboo, aerial arts is gaining traction as an emerging go-to form of exercise, much like spinning or yoga. Fit for students, fellow swans and soccer moms alike, and customized for all ages and levels of ability, this motioncentric workout offers cardio, strength training, endurance, coordination and balance.

"You could consider it performance art—combining fitness, performing arts and theater arts," says Karen, who runs the studio with her husband and resident certified "tissu rigger," Luca Cecchini. "You're performing for yourself." The program, she adds, requires participants to evolve and encourage themselves to do more. "In usual fitness gyms, you have repetitions, but in here, it's different. It's like using the various apparatuses to mimic fitness center-based movements like chin-ups, pushups or pullups."

For first-timers, Karen advises starting with the hammock—the friendliest of the activities. The fabric is fashioned into a loop that can be used as a seat once it's suspended. "You can place your body in the hammock and create forms," she says. Weekly classes run from 45 to 90 minutes and include aerial dance fitness, aerial yoga with hammock, open gym and aerial conditioning. (Free-form fitness will be added in the fall.) A children's camp and an adult intensive program are also available. *\$22 for a single aerial fitness class, \$68 for a series of four, \$450 for summer fitness and intensive camps, 3001 Red Hill Ave., Costa Mesa, rubykarenproject.com*



IN THE LOOP  
Orange County Aerial  
Arts' Ruby Karen