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Contemporary art gallery CUAC addresses inner-city gun violence in latest exhibition

By Scotti Hill, For the Deseret News

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"I AM FASHION MODEL SIZE from Silent I," printed nylon banner, 2010, is on display at CUAC as part of Cheryl Pope's exhibition "Just Yell: (Un)Told."

Artist Cheryl Pope's exhibition "Just Yell: (Un)Told" addresses the intersection between sports, art and urban identity, all while creating a truly interactive gallery experience.

SALT LAKE CITY — As a tragic fixture of American society, gun violence continues to engender fierce political battles that divide the nation along ideological lines.

Artist Cheryl Pope's interactive art exhibition "Just Yell: (Un)Told," now on view at contemporary art gallery CUAC, forces a critical reading of the effect of gun violence on inner-city youths. By forging a connection between sports and the artistic process, Pope invites viewers to contemplate the spaces in which urban gun violence occurs.

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As a Chicago-based artist, Pope often collaborates with inner-city youths who inspire and guide her art. Their experiences and the psychological factors that shape their behavior provide powerful narratives in Pope's interactive artistic process.

While even seasoned art critics may fail to see the similarities between sports and art, Pope argues a compelling metaphor that bridges a conceptual gap between the two activities.

Sports, like art, exist in a distinct cultural realm with accompanying rituals and ephemera that are immediately recognizable to their audiences. "Just Yell: (Un)Told" serves as a reminder of the extent to which environment shapes existence. As such, visitors are sure to encounter an art exhibition unlike any other they've seen before.

A dirt-covered floor greets visitors as they step inside the gallery space. The semicircular shapes and vertical lines of a basketball court are inlaid by grass patterns within the dirt's surface.

The dirt floor, Pope said, "represents the body, the living, breathing, absorbing body; a body that holds, that remembers, that contains, that gives, that supports."

Banners flank each wall of the gallery space. Colorfully framing the dirt court, these banners mimic the accomplishment pendants displayed proudly above the rafters in high schools across the country. Such banners typically parade statistics of triumph in the form of championships won or jersey numbers of all-star players. As a striking antithesis to this norm, Pope's banners display phrases such as "I am gay," "Sometimes I feel replaceable," and "I am African-American."

"I asked a teacher on Chicago's South Side to ask his students (anonymously) for one truth and one lie that an artist was requesting," Pope said, explaining her inspiration for the banners. "I received 150 truths and lies. I had enough money at that time to produce 20 banners. I then installed these in their gym at school. The first time I met the students was in the gym when they first saw the banners and their words hung high."

In addition to confronting the struggles facing inner-city youths, these banners may well reflect the sentiments of both participants and victims of gun violence.

The inclusion of these sports artifacts within an immersive gallery space presents a startling interactive and psychological experience. Viewers are invited both to contemplate the meaning of the space's ephemera and to project their own sports memories into this space.

After exhibiting work alongside hers in a Colorado group show, executive director Adam Bateman knew he wanted to bring Pope to CUAC.

"I see artists as anthropologists and makers who are engaging with what's happening culturally, especially in visual culture, and then are critiquing and adding to it in order to define it," Bateman said. "Cheryl's work is a great addition to this conversation."

Pope's marks the third show in the past year to focus on issues of gun violence. Last year, CUAC hosted "444," an exhibition by anonymous art group MITT2020 addressing the artifacts surrounding police officer-involved homicides, and "The Letter That You're Writing Doesn't Mean You're Not Dead," an exhibition featuring Noelle Mason's longstanding embroidery project contemplating the Columbine shooting.

Bateman said that rather than seeking such subjects out, these exhibitions are responses to an increasingly pressing American conversation that art is quick to reflect.

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For those interested in a decidedly different gallery experience, “Just Yell: (Un)Told” is emblematic of the intellectually rich and often challenging terrain of contemporary art.

If you go ...

What: “Just Yell: (Un)Told”

When: Through March 11; Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m., and Saturdays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Where: CUAC, 175 E. 200 South

Phone: 385-215-6768

Web: cuartcenter.org

Scotti Hill is an art historian based in Salt Lake City. She has taught courses in art history at Westminster College and the University of Utah, and she currently works as a writer and curator.