

CHICAGO GALLERY NEWS

Cheryl Pope is Making Change Happen

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BY LAURA M. METTAM



I met Cheryl years ago when I volunteered to assist in The School of the Art Institute's (SAIC) Continuing Studies program and was placed in a fashion class she was teaching. Since then, I've kept up with Cheryl's ambitious projects and exhibitions. Her energy is contagious, her passion is palpable, and she has a unique way of connecting to youth and the community. The artist's recent work has questioned issues of power, inequality, race, gender, and segregation. Cheryl Pope has been busy. And she likes it that way.

Pope lives and works in Chicago, and is represented by Monique Meloche Gallery (Chicago), and Galleria Bianconi (Milan, Italy). She earned her Masters from SAIC in Design: Fashion, Body, and Garment in 2010 and currently teaches in SAIC's Fashion and Contemporary Practice Departments.

Top image: Cheryl Pope, *Strength to Love (for Chicago)*, 2013, rhinestones and adhesive on glass in velvet, wood and glass case. Photo credit: James Prinz Photography. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

LM: When did you become interested in art?

CP: I lived across the street from a forest preserve and was always finding and making things, but it wasn't until my senior year in high school, in my first art class with Mr. Englehart, that art became my path. He was the first to respect my intention to make. He believed in me and respected me, and this was transforming when I needed it most. I will always be grateful to him.

Cheryl Pope, *One of Many, One* (still from video), 2014. Transfer of 25 In Loving Memory R.I.P. t-shirts with air-brushed portraits of Chicago youth. Photo credit: James Prinz Photography. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

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You've had quite a busy year, with multiple exhibitions in Chicago (*Just Yell: From Within* at The Poetry Foundation; *Just Yell: Leveling the Playing Field* - DCASE Artist in Residence at the Chicago Cultural Center), as well as several others in Miami, Boulder, Germany, Italy, and Dubai. Any highlights from your spring and summer shows that stood out to you?

In each exhibition and event, I have been repeatedly reminded of the value of quality over quantity. I think so often we evaluate based on numbers or scale. For me I can put all my time and all my heart into a project and reach only one person, but I can really impact them - and this is all that matters to me. This gives me all the courage, energy and purpose to continue.



Cheryl Pope, *JUST YELL / POETRY as SELF DEFENSE: FROM WITHIN*, 2015. Installation view, The Poetry Foundation (Chicago) during performance of *WALK WITH ME #3*. Photo credit: James Prinz Photography. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Do you enjoy having a full plate?

Yes! Life only happens once. I live each day with this attitude. I have so much respect for my dreams and I want to do all I can to make both mine and others' come true.

What's next this fall and into 2016?

I'm curating a one-night fashion event on September 18, 5-10pm, for the Art Loop Alliance (closing Wabash between Monroe and Madison); exhibiting in ARTBO in Bogota, Colombia; performing and installing a public work in Osnabrück, Germany; and participating in the Elmhurst Art Museum's Biennial in December.

Your recent *Just Yell* exhibitions have shined a light on the issue of gun violence and its impact on society - city youth in particular. Under the guise of cheerleading, you've made discussions about this urban issue accessible while humanizing those involved. I applaud your continued involvement with this topic. Can you elaborate on your connection with the subject and what led you to pursue this series?

Engaging with youth in communities throughout Chicago, it became more and more evident to me the many ways in which youth are affected by gun violence and I felt called to respond to it. I decided to use Cheerleading, formerly called Yelling, as a framework to contain their voices and reactions to these issues. Cheerleading suggests sides, it suggests winners and losers, but more importantly it suggests a team, a community and a shared goal and belief.

The idea of yelling is complicated: you can yell for help, for fear, for hope, but you are yelling to be heard. And these voices need to be seen and heard.

How has your perception of gun violence, and perhaps physical violence, changed from when you first started working in this series?

I have become more aware and educated on the many systems, layers, and politics involved that complicate, enable, and resist positive change. I think it's easy to point a finger, or to say, "get rid of guns" to try to solve a problem, but these issues are deeply rooted in systems of power and privilege. Instead we need to accept and confront the fact that segregation, unequal education and racism are the most harmful acts of violence, and it is here that the change needs to happen.

You have worked with youth and young artists and poets on a number of different projects over the years. What do you consider a highlight of working with younger collaborators?

This spring I was invited to be on a panel at Young Chicago Authors. After the discussion a young woman came up to ask me a question. We looked at each other and both got wide eyed the same moment. It was Del Marie Nelson, my mentee from 10 years ago at the James Jordan Boys & Girls Club. We lost track of one another and have once again connected. Since that moment she has been at the Cultural Center every day and involved in all the summer *Just Yell / Poetry as Self Defense* projects.

This was such a significant moment, as it revealed the true sense of community, of time passing and being there for different phases of a life in the community. As the saying goes, "it takes a village to raise a child," and we are all responsible for our part. It is a blessing to have the opportunity to spend time with so many young, extremely talented artists.

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You studied fashion at SAIC, among many other pursuits, and worked as a studio manager for Nick Cave. Are you in the midst of any fashion projects?

I'm currently working on a collection of kimonos as well as a fragrance line; both relate conceptually to my studio practice. I am also designing and constructing the garments I wear in my performances, which are largely in conversation with fashion as a language and the history of fashion.

What do you enjoy doing in your down time, outside of art-related activities?

I spend my time in the gym training in boxing and Muay Thai. I love to be physical, sparring, learning new drills, and improving form. There's always more to learn; always new challenges.

Forgetting time and budget limitations, what is a dream project of yours?

My dream is to have an art school. It will have a foundation that starts with a focus on the physical body in terms of health and self-care, and will include holistic spiritual therapy while maintaining a rigorous academic and studio practice that generates top contemporary work. We will have a team that travels to scout and recruit youth so that its accessibility is not dependent on privilege, but rather, on heart, intention, and talent.

One-liner Chicago favorites...

Art space: Promontory Point Park, Monique Meloche Gallery, The Poetry Foundation, Intuit, Randolph Street Flea Market

Restaurant/bar: Avec, Chicken Shop at Soho House, Owen + Alchemy, Grace (which I haven't been to yet but one day will)

Recommendations for tourists: Architecture Foundation River Tour, University of Chicago Campus, Open Mic at Young Chicago Authors on Tuesday nights.

Can you name a few artists who have inspired you?

Nick Cave (visual art); Andrei Tarkovsky (film); Steve Reich (music); Pina Bausch (dance); Jack Kerouac (poet).