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teenVOGUE

"Bold Disobedience" Art Show Was Curated by Chicago Teens

"This is someone that deserves to be represented."

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Bold Disobedience, Install Shot, 2017 (With Cheryl Pope, Walk with Me #3 Ft. Phoenix Military Academy, 2015 at center)

Rows of desks greet viewers as they enter "**Bold Disobedience**," **Weinberg/Newton Gallery**'s first student-led exhibit in Chicago's River North neighborhood. The repurposed desks have been covered with poems scratched into their surfaces by students at Chicago's Phoenix Military Academy. The piece is artist **Cheryl Pope**'s collaborative artwork "**Walk With Me #3**," one of 34 works that address issues affecting youths today, such as LGBTQ and racial bias, gentrification, and violence in under-resourced communities.

The desks are physical remnants from a 2015 performance facilitated by Cheryl, for a performance that shifted the power from the adult viewer to the student performer. The piece's position at the front of the gallery space sets a tone for the student-curated exhibition, one that interrupts the traditional power structure seen inside a gallery's white walls.

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“The whole point of us being in this space is disturbing the art world and showing that youth have power,” 19-year-old student curator Jacob Naszke tells *Teen Vogue*. “I think that is a resistance of itself.”

Jacob, Citlalli Reyes, Casey O’Grady, and Daniela “Ella” Altamirano-Iniestra are high school students who are part of a council that curated “Bold Disobedience” for Weinberg/Newton. The students on this council led the entire curatorial process without barriers from adult decision makers. The student curators made every choice for the exhibition’s presentation, from its conceptual construct to where specific works would be placed or hung within the gallery. They worked with the **Mikva Challenge**, an organization that champions students’ voices in civic engagement, and each serves on a yearlong council within the organization that presents policy recommendations to civic leaders, working closely with decision makers to address topics that affect local youths.

“With this council I can actually see that we made change,” says Jacob. “I can come here and look at all of the work and am like, Oh, we actually did this. We accomplished the goal we started off with and understand that our voice is actually being heard. We are actually using [our voice] to make bigger change in the art world.”

The exhibition combines artwork and collaborative pieces from established artists like Cheryl, with drawings, installations, and photographs made by youth artists at the Chicago High School for the Arts. Student Raven Smith’s piece, “Black Residue,” is a self-portrait, drawn in charcoal, with her fist raised in the air.

“You would see [the piece] and think that is a really amazing drawing, but you might not imagine it in a gallery next to a Victorian painting,” 17-year-old Casey tells *Teen Vogue*. “The fact that it is here, it is one of my favorite things, because this is art. This is someone that deserves to be represented.”

Representation was one of the leading curatorial decisions for the group, because they were frustrated by the art they have observed in museums and local galleries. It was important for the students to highlight black and Latinx artists, who make up a large percentage of Chicago’s population but historically have had minor visibility in the city’s art exhibitions.

Yvette Mayorga’s, “Hot Gossip,” is one of the student curators’ favorites. It’s a bright, room-size installation — made with painted elements of real frosting — that juxtaposes her family’s lived experience of immigrating to America from Mexico with the sugar-coated version of how the American dream is typically portrayed.

“My big sort of iffiness about the art world was just that it is so populated by people who are so far removed from my own experience,” says 18-year-old Ella. “. . . But [Yvette’s installation] is the opposite. You can stand in it, you can walk around in it. It is so immersive. I am the daughter of two Mexican immigrants, so I see my own childhood in here.”

“I think brown and black youth need to feel heard and not alone, and that’s really what I wanted to depict, a space that is political and is touching base on the sort of hard subjects our bodies are being restrained by, but also celebratory,” Yvette tells *Teen Vogue*. “I was really thinking about how I could create a space that was decadent, while also highlighting issues young women of color are facing.”

Next to Yvette’s work is a piece by the artist **Dread Scott** entitled “**Stop**,” a two-channel video installation projected on opposite sides of the gallery that features six men repeatedly telling the camera how many times they have been stopped by police. Half of the subjects featured are from Brooklyn, while the other half live in Liverpool, England.

“In many areas of life, 15- through 18-year-olds are not thought of as having interest in or thoughts about the world we all share,” Dread tells *Teen Vogue*. “The young men I worked on ‘Stop’ with, [their] lives are very directly affected by policies that adults create and have much to say about it. In this spirit, I’m sure

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that many students have views on not only what art they are interested in seeing but also how the ideas of these artworks speak to bigger questions confronting humanity as a whole.”

By creating an inclusive space that makes them feel comfortable speaking about these issues, the student curators hope that visitors, especially students, might also feel comfortable addressing these topics in their own schools and communities.

“These are big-picture issues distilled into a more accessible space,” Ella says. “This is where we have the power. I got to see that in the gallery, where I typically wouldn’t see the gallery as youth-led or led by people of color. This is a space where I feel comfortable and where other people like me feel comfortable in dealing with these big national issues.”

"Bold Disobedience" runs through Friday, September 1, at Weinberg/Newton Gallery in Chicago. You can learn more about how the Mikva Challenge empowers youths' voice by visiting its [website](#).