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Christopher Borrelli

## Artist and former Chicago Golden Gloves winner Cheryl Pope welcomes a fight



One of Cheryl Pope's works, "Too Young to Die," is spelled in carnations and roses that will be left to wilt in the gallery throughout the run of the show. (John Konstantaras / Chicago Tribune)

Cheryl Pope wanted to know what it felt like to knock someone out, and so she did.

She knocked someone out. She's a native of Palos Park, just southwest of Chicago, and speaks with the flat, nasal working-class no-nonsense of a Chicago caricature. She is also a conceptual artist; she teaches fashion at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and has the dark stormy eyes and off-handed elegance of an Italian movie star. Seven years ago,

at 32, after a year-and-a-half of training, Pope won the annual Chicago Golden Gloves tournament.

“Why?” she asked. “Well, I’ll tell ya, it wasn’t to become a boxing artist or something. My goal was two things, to win the Gloves and to knock someone out. I wanted to know if I would find myself having to stop during (the fight) and feel bad for the other person. What I found was I wanted to keep going. And once I saw her knocked down, I wanted to keep punching her. Later I watched the video of it and even the ref is sort of saying, ‘Go to your corner.’ Two years later I saw that same girl at this community meeting, and it was ...”

She cringes.

“Awkward” hangs in the air, unspoken.



Cheryl Pope's art exhibit in Rockford includes a boxing ring. She is a former Chicago Golden Gloves winner. (John Konstantaras / Chicago Tribune)

As Pope recounts this, she stares at the boxing ring that has been erected in the main gallery of the Rockford Art Museum, which recently opened “Not Without a Fight,” a sort of survey/retrospective of the past 10 years of Pope’s often moving, occasionally pugilistic practice. That ring, for instance. Take it as a metaphor for confrontation. Or as a boxing

ring: On Friday, the museum will host a real fight night, albeit one in which bouts are punctuated by poetry readings. Pope will not be fighting. She'll be the ring leader.



Pope's art generally uses a lot of text. One piece in the show is a rug the exact dimensions of a Chicago juvenile-detention cell. (John Konstantaras / Chicago Tribune)

She'll do it surrounded by her works, which are often scrawled with quotes from the Chicago and New York City teenagers she interviews. Varsity jackets that don't have school names etched across the backs but hard truths ("I took the blame"). Banners that don't honor championships but unsettled feelings ("Sometimes I tell the truth too much"). Pope talks to students about gun violence, and about responsibility, and anxiety, and jail, and growing up, then she creates works that draw on their conversations. And when she sells these works, a portion of the sale goes to the student who gave her the quote. Add to this a gold-painted basketball (reading "Truth Be Told") and a disassembled punching bag, and the Rockford museum — housed in a former Sears — looks distinctly like a gym.

And yet — *Rockford?*

Why not a Chicago show for Pope, who is accessible, provocative, approachable, arguably underrated, and not to mention an artist from Chicago, directly addressing the most pressing issues of Chicago? Why a show in Rockford?

Because Rockford curator Carrie Johnson was a fan, and like Pope, who now divides her time between Chicago and Brooklyn, Johnson saw the relevance of the work extending far beyond Illinois. Johnson said: “I thought, what are these kids talking about in these works? Well, that’s also Rockford. Maybe even more so. We are a blue-collar community and for long, this museum has had the reputation of ‘Oh, I can’t go there, I wouldn’t understand.’ But the point of art is not always to understand. Sometimes it’s to feel and connect and speak directly. So of course we would welcome an artist and activist who is creating works from the seemingly simple act of listening to people we don’t hear from.” (To underline the point, Pope insisted that, for the four-month run of her show, the museum let anyone 18 or younger get in free; the museum agreed.)

For a dozen years, Pope served as the studio director for Nick Cave, the celebrated Chicago-based artist. He owns a work by Pope titled “This or That.” It’s installed in his home. It’s constructed of scores of faux gold chains, meticulously stitched together and arranged to resemble a basketball hoop melting downward and pooling on the ground into a kind of golden chalk outline of a dead body.

“To understand Cheryl is to understand how committed she is to creating a platform for people and their concerns,” he said. At the same time, he said, at least the piece he owns doesn’t shy from the contradiction of those concerns, “the contrast between the (basketball court) and the politics and injustice found there. It’s about a hoop dream — it’s what’s dreamed. At the same time, it’s about the circumstances.”

Pope calls her work “poetic journalism,” which is as good a description as any. (One of her most celebrated projects, a 2013 piece called “Drive By in 5 Acts,” found Pope driving viewers back and forth between segregated communities in Chicago, as a poet performed inside the vehicle.) Lately however, Pope is painting more. She feels herself moving in

new, even traditional directions. So we asked her to reflect on some of the surprising, personal objects that shaped her:

***‘#Yell\_Yell’*** (2013)

Two megaphones, pointed head to head, inches apart, with almost no breathing space between, on a base of black aluminum (that appears to be bleeding). “I remember in high school, I would get in someone’s face, I would be like bumping chests — like ready to throw down. I was thinking about that here. And how you don’t see it much anymore. I was in Miami in 2011 and outside a restaurant these two guys got into a fist fight — I remember thinking then ‘Huh, how often you see *that*?’ Especially in Chicago, where people are scared a gun will come out. And yet, we need room to yell and to be heard.” It’s a simple, unambiguous image, and a spot-on portrait of contemporary discourse.

***‘Black\_White Broach’*** (2012)

Roughly 15 feet long, made of thousands of faux-gold chains sewn together (by Pope, not a studio assistant, which is common practice among large tediously constructed works). “This took forever to make. My grandmother had a broach for her and my grandfather that said (their names) ‘Clifford’ and ‘Vivian,’ with like a chain strung between the words. Because they were always connected. It stuck in my mind.” She steps to the side and nods behind the piece. Though invisible to the casual viewer, the back resembles a clasp on any broach, down to an oversize pin. “I don’t know how many chains it is. I bulk-ordered. But when I see it I also I think of Brother Mike Hawkins, who died at 38, the age I’m now. He mentored so many kids (including a young Chance the Rapper) and people in spoken word. He used to joke this was me and him — black and white. He’s in this, too.”

***Various Banners*** (2015-2017)

Traditional school sports banners in familiar colors (Syracuse orange, Carolina blue), created after interviews with students at several schools, including Kenyon College in Ohio, Ontario College of Art and Design and Lindblom Math and Science Academy High School in West Englewood. “The first time was with Lindblom. I asked the students to tell

me one truth and one lie, and I received about 150 responses though I had funding to produce 20 banners. We hung them in the school's gym. After that I just switched to having conversations and if they said something strong, I would ask them to use it on a banner." Her banners say, "I am that one girl with no future" and "I want to be forgiving" and "I am unsure of my place."



Pope's banners were inspired by interviews with students at several schools, including Lindblom Math and Science Academy High School in West Englewood. (John Konstantaras / Chicago Tribune)

Pope's art generally uses a lot of text. One piece in the show is a rug the exact dimensions of a Chicago juvenile-detention cell, and printed across its surface: "When I get out I not never coming back." Another piece is "Too Young to Die" spelled in carnations and roses, left to wilt in the gallery throughout the run of the show (which closes May 27). Asked why she uses so much text, she talked about her background: her father was a church basketball coach and her mother was a cheerleading coach, the family was Baptist and attended church four times a week. "But there was tension and I don't feel the female voice was as heard as the male. So I started writing. I couldn't stand up for myself or my mother so everything went into notebooks, which could hold a whisper or a scream." She

said that at nine years old, she confronted a family member who had used the n-word and wrote up a contract: In exchange for not hearing another slur, she promised not to laugh annoyingly loud. She tried to locate that contract for this show — a kind of prototype of her work now — but couldn't.



Punching bag on display at "Not Without A Fight" at the Rockford Art Museum. (John Konstantaras / Chicago Tribune)

### ***'Heavyweight'*** (2017)

A boxing bag, split open and hung from the gallery wall with thick chains; the inside of the bag is covered in 23 carat gold leaf. "It was my favorite bag, so when it broke I used it. I wanted to see inside. People would always ask why I was boxing, and, well, my grandfather had won a Chicago Golden Gloves. I believe in lineage and history. I also had a lot of anger and needed stuff to come out. Still, no one will tell you exactly *why* they started boxing. But I didn't do it to become 'the artist who boxes.' For a while none of the guys (at the Chicago gym where she trained) knew I even was an artist. And I didn't know what they did. Which I liked. It's hard finding places like that when you're an adult."



"Truth Be Told" is a gold-leafed, Spalding basketball. (John Konstantaras / Chicago Tribune)

### ***'Truth Be Told' (2018)***

A Spalding basketball painted gold with "Truth Be Told" across the surface in red letters. "A lot of (my work) is something of a double play between the art world and what the work is saying, and this says, 'What do you want?' Those words, 'Truth Be Told,' forces the issue. Artists are traded between galleries the way athletes are traded. Only a limited number of either makes it to the top. But eventually, the gold goes away. You have only yourself. So, at the end of the day, do you want this gold, or do you just want to play?"

### ***'Just Yell: A Guidebook for Yellers' (2013)***

A gold-plated music stand, holding a faux 308-page high-school yearbook, most of which is dedicated to youth killed by gun violence in Chicago. Made partly in collaboration with students at Farragut Career Academy in Little Village, whom she asked to contribute statements and shouts of activism. Instead of yearbook portraits, each photo is a teenager who died (from 2012 to May 2013), paired with a picture of the person who killed them. "See all of the open spaces where a photo should be? That's because we don't know who killed a lot of our kids. This book was early (in my career), and it's like the glue that spread

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451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622

312 243 2129 [moniquemeloche.com](http://moniquemeloche.com)

outward to the rest of my work. The people speaking inside, they're not just from the South and West sides. They're all over Chicago. One young man (in the Gold Coast) said he couldn't participate because he didn't see this violence himself. I said, 'That's why we need you!' My work is about community and if I'm not being accessible, if I'm not allowing in the entire community, then what am I doing?"