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In Conversation with Cheryl Pope

written by **Caira Moreira Brown**



I first encountered Chicago-based artist Cheryl Pope through her recent installation at Monique Meloche Gallery. I was immediately drawn to the intimacy in her work, combined with the texture of the wool that allowed a softness to the vulnerability of her interracial figures. Pope's work encompasses many mediums including sculpture and performance. The underlying subjects in her work of identity with respect to race and gender stuck a chord in me. While our perception of ourselves is ever changing, there are certain characteristics that influence our identity. Pope excels at provoking the viewer to question their sense of identity.

Caira: How would you describe your practice? What are the key themes you are exploring in your work?

Cheryl: [The] key themes in my work are elevating vulnerability, challenging positions and uses of power, and celebrating equality.

Caira: Your latest show at Monique Meloche explores the bodies of an interracial couple, along with that you present these forms in a sensual depiction. How does this body of work speak to your practice of identity and race. What is your goal?

Cheryl: I think in times of crisis, love is needed most. I wanted to create images of love, of the natural and normality of different people being together, being intimate and vulnerable, and being in love. I wanted to create works that are sensual and primal, a reminder of how our fundamental human desires connect us.

Caira: The nude figures are depicted in wool needles punched into cashmere. Why did you choose this medium, and how does it speak to your larger overall message in your work?

Cheryl: I think one of the most beautiful and important qualities of this work is the material. The fact that it is all hair. That it is all natural and simply created by hair locking to other hairs. I think this material evokes a sensuality, the tactile surface asks to be touched, and though denied, it brings the viewer into their body.

Caira: What is your goal when people interact with and look at your work?

Cheryl: Gordon Parks said: “There is something about us that goes deeper than blood or black and white. It is our common search for a better life and a better world.”

I hope that people feel love, see beauty in vulnerability, humor in attempted articulations, and a joy in the magical love stories that defy all politics and wars.



IMAGE: Installation view, Cheryl Pope, “BASKING NEVER HURT NO ONE,” 2019. Two canvases on the white walls of the gallery. On the left are two naked bodies, one white and one black intertwining their body parts against a black and white background. The other canvas features the same two nude figures in close proximity to each other against a green and orange background. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago/Photo: RCH Photography.

Caira: How does power translate into your work and to your viewer?

Cheryl: I don't think power ever translates as much as it is always present, expressing its gain or its loss, its position. It changes as the time changes. the work is read and power is understood differently, by each person, in each context, each city, and within each time. It can never be static but is always present and asking us to understand it for ourselves.

Caira: I know you studied under performance artist Nick Cave. How does that influence your work?

Cheryl: A sensibility towards material and craftsmanship and most importantly making work with a consciousness, that is responsible for responding to the injustices of the time we live in as well as the mark we are leaving behind.

Caira: You have a masters in design with an emphasis on fashion, body, and garment. How does that influence your practice and artistic journey in regards to identity?

Cheryl: Fashion is so much about identity. It was very natural for me to begin with fashion, to begin with the body as a way to confront and challenge issues of identity. Working with in the idea of fashion, body, and garment, the definitions are so loose, evolving, and we expect them to evolve, so it's a very inviting framework to engage with and encouraging to continue to challenge norms and think outside the box.

Caira: What does the rest of 2019 have in store for you?

Cheryl: Continuing to work on this series, a few group shows, a trip to Morocco and teaching in the fall at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago.

Cheryl Pope's latest exhibition, BASKING NEVER HURT NO ONE at Monique Meloche Gallery is currently on view until August 17th, 2019.

FEATURED IMAGE: Installation view, Cheryl Pope, "BASKING NEVER HURT NO ONE," 2019. A large canvas against a white background. The canvas features two naked bodies, one black and one white intertwining with each other constructed out of unspun wool. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery/Photo: RCH Photography