

# ARTslant Chicago

## An Artist's Responsibility

by Joel Kuennen



### *Just Yell*

Cheryl Pope

moniquemeloche gallery

2154 W. Division , Chicago, IL 60622

June 22, 2013 - August 3, 2013

Chicago is a city of neighborhoods: this is a kind way to put it. In reality, Chicago suffers from deep segregation – limiting the potential of a majority of its citizens. Avenues such as Western are lines that mark boundaries between races and income brackets. As one travels west on Division, from Wicker Park, median household income drops by \$30,000 upon crossing Western Avenue. With this drop in income, comes a drop in school funding, resulting in neighborhood schools that lack everything from toilet paper to textbooks.

In the shadow of the disparities of reality, Cheryl Pope's *Just Yell* focuses on what connects a city – taking as its aesthetic Ursprung the American touchstone that is High School. The “all-American dream”, as Pope calls it, comes in the form of muscle cars, varsity letters, trophy placards, spirit sticks and yearbooks. Through objects and actions, Pope moves to find the ties that bind while bringing attention to the lines that yet divide the multiple experiences of Chicagoans. By calling upon the gallery goer to contemplate the lines of segregation in urban Chicago and to feel, for themselves, the experience that their fellow Chicagoans must live with day-to-day while at the same time appealing to what can only be called an “American Aesthetic”, Pope reminds us that fundamentally, contemporary art is actionable and despite a dominant polarizing rhetoric of the Other, we do have commonalities and common experiences that can bridge the gaps in economic and therefore phenomenological experience.

The six art objects on display at Monique Meloche until August 3rd, one being a poignant video, are representative of a certain strain in Pope's work that she calls her “public social voice”. These works are made “for and with” the community, a distinction in intentions that by itself differentiates *Just Yell* from most exhibitions.

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Cheryl Pope, *Remember to Remember*, 2013; ©James Prinz Photography; Courtesy of artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

*Remember to Remember* I found to be the most affective piece in the exhibition proper. Comprised of 178 plates that one would usually find adorning sports trophies locked behind glass cases in High School hallways, the plates commemorate each shooting death of a Chicago youth from January, 2012 to June 15th, 2013. In between the names are plates inscribed with haikus written by 7th and 8th grade students from Noble Elementary including Haidya Pendleton (the black plates) who was killed in January of this year in an affluent neighborhood near Barack Obama’s former home, a fact that complicates and explicates Chicago’s tenuous relationship between gun violence and segregation.

The yearbook Pope assembled includes headshots of both victims and killers alike, formatted in a grid like the familiar yearbook that gathers dust on all our shelves. There is no differentiation between “gang-violence” or other shooting deaths. “Gang-violence,” Pope points out, is a term often used to differentiate and compartmentalize the violence, even a way of justifying the tragic loss by Othering the death in a dichotomy of Victim and Aggressor.

*Stength to Love*, a rhinestone encrusted spirit stick, the length of a Chicago Police baton, sits revered in a shadow box on the wall. The white and black rhinestones are taken from the Latin Kings’ use of rhinestones in a ceremonial crown used by the gang. The Latin Kings differentiate themselves through politicization and stringent group discipline. Members aspire to a higher consciousness through what has been called a “homemade religion” called Kingism, the goal of which is for the individual to reach the “New King Stage” wherein the individual “learns that his ills lie at the roots of a system completely alien to his train of thought and his natural development, due to the components of dehumanization that exist therein.” The Latin Kings have over 25,000 members, making it the largest gang in Chicagoland where Puerto Ricans seeking agency in a hegemonic society founded it in the 1940’s.



Cheryl Pope, *Strength to Love*, 2013, ©James Prinz Photography; Courtesy of artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

During the opening, groups of high school students known as “yellers” from Phoenix Military Academy performed yells, chants on inequality and justice, in front of Meloche’s Division Street gallery. This brought the gallery to the sidewalk, brought the art out to the people. Around 6:30, candy-colored muscle cars pulled up to take gallery-goers on a drive through Humboldt Park for a performance piece entitled *Drive-by in 5 Acts*. In each car, a spoken-word poet performed for the other passengers.

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I rode with Luis in a baby blue '62 Chevy with one other person in the slick vinyl backseat. Britteney Black Rose Kapri was our spoken-word poet and played a game of Truth, Truth, Lie with us. We would have to tell two truths and a lie and the others would have to guess which was the lie. We cycled through stereotypes and perceived difference, the "game" element enough to dull attempts to disguise our prejudices. "I didn't know my father. I saw my first gun in Kindergarten. My brother split my lip three times in my life. Which is the lie?" As we pulled up to the gallery, "B" told us that all her truths were lies. A cold reveal that drove a very sobering point home.

Cheryl Pope's practice is fundamentally a *social* one. "It's about being responsible...the responsibility of being an artist today is to look at what is happening around me and react to it." When I asked Pope about the discomfort and tension that her work plays within, she replied: "Our idea of normal can only be made surface when it is exposed to us that there is other. That's really what allowing this tension to coexist is all about."

Forthcoming events associated with *Just Yell* include hosting the MCA Teen Creative Agency's living room in front of the gallery on Saturday June 29th from 2-4 PM and a panel discussion on July 13th to discuss the failures of social practice.

—Joel Kuennen

<http://www.artslant.com/chi/articles/show/35509>

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