

## Gun Violence Wears a Cheerleading Uniform at Cheryl Pope's New Exhibit

By Jason Foumberg 6/21/2013

"The art world is going to hate me for this, but I don't care," says Cheryl Pope, the Chicago artist who, on Saturday, will debut a new body of artwork that addresses the topic of youth gun violence in a cheerleading uniform. Those are fighting words, but Pope thinks we need more fighting words, and fighting songs, and fighting poetry—and less fighting guns. With rallying cries and team spirit, Pope says she wants to use the summer solstice to bring awareness to gun violence, segregation, and its impact on Chicago youth, before what will likely be another killing season.



Photo by James Prinz

When talking about the exhibit *Just Yell*, Pope mentions Debby Downer quite a bit, hissing her name as if she were this project's evil spirit. She's hoping that cheerleading, as a framework and a metaphor, will provide an accessible entry point for gallery goers, a group not typically affected by gun violence in their daily lives. On Saturday, five muscle cars, each staffed with its own poet, will give joy rides and private poetry readings through Chicago's segregated communities. Pope's goal is to increase our city's collective supply of compassion.

Part of Pope's process was working with seven Chicago high schools and developing a curriculum that focused on students' voices. "Yes, I admit it, I myself am disconnected both physically and emotionally from Chicago's violence problem. I have grown up with the privilege of never having to fear for my life from walking outdoors," says one student. (You can hear him read his statement on the website <http://justyell.org>.) This is just one confession of several that became the impetus for Pope's sculptures and performance pieces.

Why does Pope expect the art world will hate her for this? Perhaps it's because her "art is for the people, not for the art world." Yet, she's excited to present her activism in one of Chicago's most

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successful commercial contemporary art galleries, Monique Meloche Gallery, in Bucktown. “I want to open up what a gallery can be,” she says. The combination of cheerleading paraphernalia and homicides is a jarring one, but Pope makes it work, stylistically hacking “the American Dream,” as a mode of protest. An artwork titled “Strength to Love,” referencing an MLK speech, is a blinged-out spirit stick, which Pope talks about seriously, as if it were a sacred tool of unity.

“I’ve cried like 1,000 times during this project,” she says. Pope also narrowly avoided getting shot while taking photographs of artwork with a student in Little Village. “This guy let out five bullets like it was nothing,” says Pope. “How do we begin to grapple with these issues?”

In addition to the muscle-car tours at the exhibition’s opening, the Phoenix Military Academy will be onsite performing, and a DJ will be remixing cheers written by the high school students. “I want it to be a movement,” says Pope. “What do you want to yell about?”

*Just Yell opens Saturday, June 22, 4pm–7pm, at Monique Meloche Gallery, 2154 W Division.  
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