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Written by Steve Ruiz

***Just Yell* at Monique Meloche Gallery**

Cheryl Pope's *Just Yell* seeks to bring attention to differing experiences of Chicago's epidemic of youth violence, and Monique Meloche Gallery provides an excellent site for the project. The gallery is located on Division Street, where the divide between Chicago's neighborhoods is clearly illustrated. The tides of millennial capital have twice swept through Bucktown, raising rents and evacuating families until reaching a high-water mark three blocks east of Humboldt Park, the heart of Puerto Rican culture in Chicago and one of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods. Just in sight of the sixty-foot Puerto Rican flags that form a gateway to the stretch of Division Street known as Paseo Boricua, Monique Meloche Gallery sits like a forward outpost of another world.



Cheryl Pope, *Strength to Love (Chicago spirit stick)*, 2013.
Rhinestones and adhesive glass in velvet, wood, and glass case.
9 x 24 x 3 1/4 in. moniquemeloche, Chicago; Photo: James Prinz

As you continue up the street, the different atmospheres are clearly marked. Ahead, in Wicker Park, hundreds of the city's mostly white middle class pack into cafés and restaurant patios, enjoying the weather and anticipating the evening's Blackhawks hockey game; behind, in Humboldt Park, empty storefronts and struggling social services create an atmosphere of violence that increases block by westward block. Chicago is a city where warm weather brings a unique threat to vulnerable populations; more than five hundred people were killed here last year, most young, black, and Hispanic and killed in the summer.

During the first weekend of the season, a performance related to the exhibition took place at the gallery. Outside, DJ Raj Mahal was at a mixing table, bobbing his head over his laptop. Earlier, as a first indication of Pope's aesthetic blending, students from the Phoenix Military Academy had assembled in *Just Yell* '13 T-shirts

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and performed a brief drill chant, providing the cheerlike “yell” that furnishes the exhibition’s title. “I am ready to be heard,” the assembly of teens had shouted in affirmation, some standing at attention, others reading from scripts. “I will always conduct myself to be the change I want to see.” The drill mixed the institutional dream world of American school spirit with the real world of urban violence and grief.

Farther down, a trio of muscle cars purred, gassing proudly from rumbling carburetors, while a volunteer gathered names and waiver signatures for the exhibition’s most participatory element: a journey through Humboldt Park with a young poet and a game of Two Truths and a Lie. If Pope’s ambitions are to make the city’s violence more human—to take visitors across the chasm from newsprint statistic to blood-stained reality—she delegated the task perfectly. Britteney Black Rose Kapri, the poet who led our ride, was in full confidence and form, countering our playful truths and lies with three options, all somewhere between trauma and tragedy.

These performative works are products of Cheryl Pope’s yearlong collaboration with hundreds of local Chicago students and young adults on the subject of violence. Inside the gallery, however, *Just Yell* remains an exhibition primarily of sculptures made through or inspired by Pope’s student collaborations. *YELL (varsity patch)* (2013), a larger version of the exhibition’s recurring logo stitched in wool and felt, dominates the far wall. Closer to the front, a six-foot steel and aluminum sculpture titled *#Yell_Yell* shows two megaphones in close opposition, raised on poles above a pool of spreading black blood, its wet appearance achieved through the application of a coat of black automotive enamel. A richly designed yearbook titled *Just Yell, A Guidebook for Yellers* (2013) rests on a gold-plated music stand in the center of the gallery, a blend of poetry and photography. Along with a video of a student performing a “yell,” the exhibition also includes a golden rhinestone spirit stick. *Strength to Love* (2013) is framed like an exotic gang relic, leaping imaginatively between artisanal weapon and status symbol. Beside it is the exhibition’s most sobering sculpture, *Remember to Remember* (2013), a perpetual plaque case that bears the names not of athletic heroes but of fallen teens, interspersed with grieving poetry—another clashing, cynical contrast of violence culture with the vibrant optimism of cheer.

The questions Pope raises are obviously worth asking: What deserves to be remembered? What is valuable? What is worth celebrating? Perhaps a less rhetorical form of asking would have been more effective. As a viewer, I felt the artist’s sculptural objects spent too much of their creative momentum working negatively against the values of high school cheer, using inner-city youth violence to strike at a minor cultural phenomenon where vapidness and banality are, at least for the art set, already taken for granted. I doubt this was the artist’s intention, however. The exhibition’s successes include those works that leveraged performative presence to translate the comfortable acceptance of awful truths into tragic confrontations with, if not violence itself, then with the people who cannot ignore it and are capable of giving voice to its reality.

Just Yell is on view at Monique Meloche Gallery, in Chicago, through August 3, 2013.

<http://dailyserving.com/2013/07/just-yell-at-monique-meloche-gallery/>

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