

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

OUT

The Politics of Pole Dancing

By Brian Schaefer

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"Gerard & Kelly: P.O.L.E." at the New Museum. Courtesy New Museum, New York | Photo: Jesse Untracht Oakner

Gerard & Kelly's new exhibition grapples with queer identity, AIDS activism, subway performers and Ferguson — with the help of two 16-foot poles.

A little while ago, at a Radical Faerie gathering in Vermont, an impromptu pole dancing session occurred, kind of like an open mic night for adventurous bodies. Ryan Kelly decided to give it a try. "There was so much fun and pleasure around it and none of the weird hetero-normative objectification stuff that you normally associate with it," he says. Sitting next to him, Brennan Gerard adds, "It's usually thought of as a spectacle of female sexuality as defined by men. In this context, it was just queer people using it as a ritual for community building."

That experience ultimately inspired *P.O.L.E.: People, Objects, Language Exchange*, the latest installation from the team of Gerard & Kelly, which opened this week at the New Museum in Manhattan and runs through February 15. On Wednesday, Kelly found himself crawling up, sliding down, and swinging around two 16-foot golden poles in a stark white gallery surrounded by a crowd of discriminating New York spectators, rather than a bunch of friendly queer utopians. His performance partner was Roz "The Diva" Mays who more than earned her nickname with athletic pole stunts, sultry facial expressions and a confident, playful swagger. The two engaged in a series of games, stripped to their skivvies, and confessed information about their siblings, running the thematic gauntlet from sensual to personal to political. The work, called "Two Brothers," is performed daily at 1 p.m., 3 p.m., and 5 p.m. by a rotating cast that includes subway performers, exotic dancers and contemporary artists. It is the centerpiece of a robust installation that is the culmination of a six-month residency at the museum and consists of video, sculpture, text and performance.

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P.O.L.E. uses pole dancing as an entry point into conversations about relationships (namely, sibling relationships) and race, though that wasn't the original intention. Initially, the idea was to explore the queer appropriation of pole dancing, as witnessed at the Radical Faerie retreat. At the start of their residency, Gerard and Kelly set up two large poles in the New Museum's fifth floor gallery as a way to conduct movement research. They initiated Thursday night pole dancing classes taught by Keisha Franklin, a yoga, dance and pole instructor, and opened them to the public. During museum hours, the poles were available for general use.



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The day after a New York grand jury failed to indict a police officer in the choking death of Eric Garner, Gerard and Kelly walked into the gallery to find three young black men practicing on the poles. “They were in our installation doing the most graceful, virtuosic, beautiful movement and everyone in the room was riveted,” says Kelly. “It felt like a deeply reparative process had happened because everyone in the city was upset and we didn’t know what to do about it.”

The young men were members of The Chosen Ones, a subway dance crew, and they were using the installation for practice. Early in conceptualizing the process, Gerard and Kelly had discussed incorporating subway performers into the project and had even approached a few on trains. “Sometimes the interactions were weird because you’re dealing with a lot of surface differences,” says Gerard. “Mostly the guys are black and young and we’re these white, queer dudes. That’s a really toxic construction, potentially.” But then The Chosen Ones showed up.

“We started talking with them and found we had a lot in common. We’re all dancers, we wanted to work on something.” From that interaction, another crew, We Live This, was brought in. “We basically found our entire cast through that process of having the poles on the fifth floor and just having people come to it,” says Gerard.



“It was a really risky thing to ask these young men to participate in our project in some way, but we did,” says Kelly. “We wanted to use the project as a way of getting in touch, literally make contact with these young black men and bringing different communities around the pole together.” He acknowledges that the invitation could open them up to criticism for exploiting power and class dynamics, as well as the kind of cultural appropriation that they themselves were initially exploring. “I think we’re probably going to get a lot of shit for this show because we’re two white guys and we’re working with seven black performers,” Kelly says. “There’s still this idea of identity politics that is really strong in art which is, you can speak for your own identity, which I guess means LGBTQ for me, but if you try to stretch across gender, race or class division, then you’re speaking for the other and that’s problematic.”

In part as a way to address this, Gerard and Kelly decided to reinstall a powerful piece from the New Museum’s small permanent collection: A neon sign commissioned by the museum in 1987

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from ACT UP of a pink triangle over the words Silence = Death. “We installed *Silence = Death* because that’s the movement that we have somehow legitimate claim to and we can orient ourselves there,” says Kelly. “But we wanted to stage it in relationship to this post-Ferguson moment and this second wave of civil rights to ask the question, what do queer people have to do with the criminalization of young black men? I really think the legacy of ACT UP and queer activism was to fight oppression, it wasn’t about gay rights. The modern gay rights movement has become more targeted in its interest.”

The personal and the political have been at the heart of Gerard and Kelly’s artistic practice since they met, at a charity auction at the Rainbow Room, 12 years ago. At the time, Kelly was dancing with the New York City Ballet but looking to push beyond that world and Gerard was dabbling with his own work as well. They started collaborating, ultimately receiving their MFAs from UCLA’s Interdisciplinary Studio together. The process helped them break out of the insular dance scene, broaden their scope to include film, text and visual art, and then break into museums, which provide a larger and more unstructured palette on which to grapple with the questions that interest them.

“Those questions keep coming back to trying to find validation for non-normative relationships and forms of intimacy that are not over-determined by social constructs,” says Gerard. “Every part of our work comes out of our relationship, which is a partnership in life and in work. We’re trying to think how that itself fits into the world.”



Performers include Lauren Bakst, TyTy Love, Roz “The Diva” Mays, Forty Smooth, Tatyana St. Louis, Justin Tate, Tyke Turner, Chosen Ones, and We Live This.

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