

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

BROOKLYN RAIL

Approaching the Pole; Gerard & Kelly's P.O.L.E. at the New Museum

By Leslie Allison

March 5, 2015



Two Brothers at the New Museum, Roz Mays and Tanya St. Louis. Photo: Jesse Untracht-Oakner.

Pole dancing is a form generally excluded from the critical discourse surrounding dance, and—though increasingly less so—dance is a form historically excluded from the critical discourse of fine arts and the museum. It is thrilling then to experience Gerard & Kelly's P.O.L.E. (People, Objects, Language, Exchange), a series of events and performances at the New Museum that shrug off these distinctions and allow pole dance to exist both as Dance and as Fine Art, with capitals D, F, and A, respectively.

On the afternoon that I saw *Two Brothers*, a P.O.L.E. score for two dancers and two poles, the performers were Tanya St. Louis, a teacher at Brooklyn's Finest Pole Dancing Studio and Sacred, and Roz Mays, who performs as Roz "The Diva" and also teaches at Sacred. I later interviewed the dancers about their experience with P.O.L.E. and their involvement in the development of *Two Brothers*. "It was a collaborative effort coming up with movements that would best define the message of the piece," says St. Louis. Mays elaborates, "Brennan [Gerard] and Ryan [Kelly] made our happiness, creativity, and specialties a priority. They asked me questions and honestly listened to my answers. I have never felt so respected as a performer in my life."

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Rather than booming music through a fancy sound system, the performers in *Two Brothers* are accompanied by the tinny sounds produced by iPhones that they borrow from audience members. This kind of casual DIY aesthetic is offset by the formal virtuosity and awe-inspiring strength of the pole dancing itself. After quietly introducing herself to an audience member with a handshake, St. Louis asks him to volunteer his phone, requesting that he play a certain song and then lie down at the pole's base. She lifts herself onto the pole above him and maneuvers the verticality in powerful, elegant ways: curling into the pole like a cocoon hanging on a branch, extending her body through the air perpendicular to the pole, then inverting to face the volunteer, reach her arm down, and touch his cheek.

Mays and St. Louis connect with each other on several different levels throughout the piece, playing games of rock-paper-scissors, smiling at each other, ducking under each other's arms. Physical gestures of support (one dancer's back becoming a table for the other to stand upon, one's feet becoming a stand for balancing the other's inverted shoulders) are enforced with repeated verbal acknowledgements ("rest," "boost," "you okay?"). Their identities overlap as one dancer narrates pole choreography from a first-person perspective ("I approach the pole, I take my time") while the other dancer enacts the movements. The two begin to circle around one pole, each lovingly describing the specific traits of a sibling ("When I think of my brother"; "When I think of my sister"). At the conclusion of the piece, they each climb to the top of their separate poles and perform a tranquil unison sequence before slowly sliding down, floating like synchronized swimmers through water.

Many emotional elements present in *Two Brothers*—tenderness, personal connection, playfulness, honesty, humor—are missing in popular representations of pole dance. Both performers are quick to correct this: "Pole Dance displays a wide range of emotion. Most people only think of heels and hair flicks, which is one of my favorite styles, but there is also humor, sadness, rage, etc. Pole is just like any other form of dance that allows the dancers to express themselves freely," St. Louis explains.

When asked to compare the New Museum audience to the audiences they are accustomed to, the performers agree that the greatest difference is sound. "Normally, I perform to raucous screams and insane cheering; people being quiet freaked me out a little bit," Mays says, adding, "more importantly, I was thrilled that so many new eyes got to see my craft. Ninety-nine percent of those museumgoers had no idea what they were walking into." When I ask what P.O.L.E. means for the future of pole dancing, Mays emphasizes the "Exchange" element in "People, Objects, Language, Exchange": "I love that so many young polers of color were showcased and celebrated. Ryan and Brennan have made me a better teacher and dancer in so many ways—I'm hyped to take what they've taught me to my own students."

Though largely buoyant in tenor, *Two Brothers* occasionally lets in chilling strains of loss that necessarily accompany any discussion of love and kinship. When the dancers rest supine at the base of their poles, Gran Fury's neon pink "SILENCE=DEATH" piece looming over them in all its electric urgency, their bodies readily transform into two corpses. "'SILENCE=DEATH' was a constant and clear presence through the *Two Brothers* piece. I hope that image becomes scorched into [the audience's] memory," St. Louis notes. Another artwork invoking grief and loss in the gallery space was an inconspicuous video piece utilizing three television screens on the floor. On one screen, a white torso and a black torso extend arms to each other, seeming to touch and not touch at the same time; on the next, a black hand and white hand repeatedly try to catch a falling iPad on which is displayed the grainy image of Darren Wilson with a slain Michael Brown, framed by asphalt and bright green grass; on the final screen a finger swipes the iPad through an endless stream of the same death scene until it becomes a blur.

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Lauren Bakst occupies the time between performances of *Two Brothers*, enacting an ongoing solo score called *Reverberations*. Bakst delivers an oral and physical history of events, conversations, and gestures that have occurred throughout Gerard & Kelly's six-month residency at the New Museum, from 65 days ago up to the current moment. She performs an embodied archive of P.O.L.E. with precision, giving equal weight to minor details and major concepts. Bakst recounts Ryan Kelly's response to an audience question about the contextual crossover of dance into art: "Ryan said, 'We're just shuttling around the river between these two fields.'" In the case of P.O.L.E., that river is an exciting place to be.

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