

A cheer thing: Sunset Park sculptor builds imaginary cheerleading equipment

By Kevin Duggan



Athletic art: Sunset Parker Kat Chamberlin's gym equipment-like sculptures show the serious and dangerous sides of cheerleading. Photo by Caroline Ourso

Two-four-six-eight! It's work we should appreciate!

A new sculpture series will expose the darker side of cheerleading, as part of the group exhibition "Serious Play," opening at Bric on June 27. Sunset Park sculptor Kat Chamberlin said that the women who dance along the sidelines at sports games are athletes who are routinely dismissed because of their rah-rah feminine style.

"It's had this history of objectifying women's bodies and we've infantilized these girls," said Chamberlin. "There's this idea that a woman shouldn't be expressing her sexuality or she comes off as not serious." Chamberlin started by interviewing cheerleaders at the Staten Island college where she teaches. She found that the women are often criticized for wearing hyper-feminine uniforms and styles, but that they nevertheless follow their passion.

"We talked a lot about the representation of them in the media and they said, 'We know people think we're slutty,' but they shrugged their shoulders and said, 'I enjoy that I do this very difficult sport,'" the artist said.

Chamberlin crafted her sculptures based on some of the cheerers's most daring balancing acts, including "Handstand I," "Handstand II," and "High V." Many of her pieces evoke imaginary exercise equipment that might be used by cheerleaders to practice their moves. She also created a series of glass and plexiglass objects called "Anti-Fragile," which hint at the ruthless damage the women experience while creating their polished performances.

"Many of the girls injure themselves regularly; they do extremely difficult tricks in the air," Chamberlin said. "[The sculptures] have this cold and also violent form to them."

Her figures are part of the Bric exhibition "Serious Play: Translating Form, Subverting Meaning" which showcases sculptures that illustrate the playfulness at the center of art. The show also includes fellow Kings County creators Chris Bogia, Damien Davis, Amanda Valdez, Julien Gardair, and Ronny Quevedo.

Cheerleading is a form of play, but because of its demanding formations, it is also very serious, according to Chamberlin.

"Play often involves a group a community, you're trying to recreate something together but it's serious, not playful," she said. The cheerleaders she worked with will present a one-time performance in the exhibition space on Aug. 1 at 7 p.m. — but without smiling, which creates a weird atmosphere, said Chamberlin.

"It's odd and uncanny. Something's off, it feels a little more threatening," she said.