

Cirque du KC: Aerial fabrics take flight in the West Bottoms

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It's Tuesday night in a West Bottoms loft, and Jade Osborne, 31, swathed in unapologetically gold leggings, hoists herself up a column of fabric. Her lithe body suspends nearly 10 feet above dingy hardwood, her limbs pretzeled in a tangle of stop-sign-red cloth.

Cigarette smoke and bouncy techno beats fill the private loft as a handful of women wait their turns. Their spandexed, taffy bodies dangle from two sets of fabric that cascade from the rafters and pool on the floor. The women are marionettes in control of their own strings.

After each dancer descends, she shuffles to the sidelines to catch her breath.

That's the thing about aerial fabrics, a circus art form popularized by Cirque du Soleil in which acrobats flip and pose while suspended on fabric. It looks effortless. It's anything but.

A throng of 20- and 30-something women — and lately, an adventuresome man or two — trickle into the loft of the group's founder, Rachel McMeachin, throughout the week to practice. Most of the performers have appeared regularly since October, when McMeachin, 38, installed the fabrics on a whim.

What started as frivolous playtime among girlfriends is planting the seeds of a trend in Kansas City.

Now, as these pioneers prepare for a performance and their premier public class at Scott Fitness, they need only to score a suitable venue, develop a Web site, conceive fundraising projects, collect recruits, find costumes and string together a presentable routine. And that's all in the next month or two.

Start me up

The performers arrive at the loft on a Sunday afternoon in January, each dressed in some mismatched combination of moth-eaten hosiery, cutoff sweats, old T-shirts and bold leggings.

For now it's about getting the hang of it. Showmanship, choreography, proper threads — that stuff comes later.

Off the fabrics, it's all salacious chatter and sips of Bloody Mary. On the fabrics, each movement amounts to a staggering display of physical defiance and grace.

The group is informal with everything but progress.

“When I started, I could only do half a pull-up and climb the fabric once, then I’d have to take a 15-minute break,” says Destiny Vinley, 26, who’s been with the group since the beginning.

Now, each can endure about two minutes at a time. But that’s still a minute or two shy of their goal for a performance.

McMeachin shows a new arrival how to heave herself up and complete a foot lock that supports her on the fabric. With the flex of an ankle, McMeachin manipulates the material into a knot that secures her foot.

The recruit, 27-year-old Rita Brinkerhoff, can’t lift her body off the ground.

“I can’t even pull up in this thing,” she laments with a sheepish chuckle.

“That’s OK,” McMeachin says. “Now you know where you’re beginning from.”

Hangin’ tough

Osborne, the one in gold leggings, somersaults while 5 feet in the air. McMeachin stretches on a yoga mat nearby.

“I think my hips got bigger!” Osborne cheers. “Yay! My hips got bigger.”

Osborne tumbles down the fabric and lights a cigarette.

“My ass has grown, like 4 inches,” McMeachin says. “All glutes, baby.”

In aerial fabrics, a bigger derriere means you’ve gained muscle where it matters. Each performer has made improvements in upper-body strength, flexibility and endurance since starting.

“I’m stronger, and it’s made me more body-aware,” McMeachin says. “I’m more aware of how I move and how I lift things.”

Still, they face limitations. The group practices with a 15-foot ceiling. To complete more advanced moves, they need at least 20 feet.

They have also struggled with liability issues.

Vinley hit resistance recently when she tried to incorporate aerial fabrics into her senior thesis work as an interdisciplinary student at the Kansas City Art Institute.

The school wouldn’t endorse it because of safety concerns, despite her initiative to become insured as a performer.

“It’s frustrating,” she says. “You’re more in control of your body doing this than you are getting into your own car.”

She even wants to do aerial fabrics off bridges and urban suspensions.

“Because it’s never been in KC,” she says, “we have the opportunity to set the standard for what it should look like in our city.”

Vinley has refocused her energy on administrative tasks such as establishing fundraisers to pay for more fabrics, costumes and a place with higher ceilings. She’s also working on promotional materials and helping McMeachin set up a three-week introductory class at the Scott Fitness West Side/Crossroads location.

“We need to develop ourselves as a credible group,” Vinley says. “It’s not just a bunch of girls monkeying around in the West Bottoms.”

Let’s hear it for the boy

A baldheaded beefcake in a Papa John’s uniform swaggers into the loft.

“What time is it?” he asks. “I have to be back by 4.”

It’s 3:33 p.m.

Within moments, his body is splayed 10 feet from the floor, his feet secured in makeshift fabric stirrups above his head. He extends his hands to McMeachin, who latches on and promptly flips upside down, binding her legs around his chest.

Josh “Yosh” Gregory, 26, is a self-described all-around performer who dabbles in fire spinning, stilt walking and, since February, aerial fabrics. He joined at the suggestion of Osborne, whom he knew from local performance group Quixotic.

“It’s a pleasure to play around with other people,” Gregory says. “Especially these lovely, sexy ladies.”

Each performer brings a different dish to the potluck, and his includes a background in showmanship, a degree in modern dance and a new set of physical advantages the formerly all-female group lacked, including upper-body strength.

“I wanted to do this to find a new fire,” he says. “A new flame of passion.”

After a breather, Gregory gets back on the fabrics, this time with Osborne. The two tango down the fabric and form a pose. From their perspective, the move is all constricting holds, rope burn and a dreadful reminder that someone forgot to wear his cup today.

From everyone else’s perspective, it’s an arresting embodiment of elegance and sensuality.

Give aerial fabrics a whirl

What: A three-week class on aerial fabrics for members of Scott Fitness.

Where: The gym's West Side location at 2020 Washington St.

When: 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Mondays starting in May, with open practice from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sundays.

More info: E-mail aerialfabrics@gmail.com or go to scottfitness.com.

What is aerial fabrics?

A: Aerial fabrics is a circus art form popularized by Cirque du Soleil in which acrobats flip and pose while suspended on fabric.

Q: What kind of fabric is used?

A: Aerial performers commonly use a polyester interlock of various widths, lengths and stretchiness.

Q: How much weight does the fabric hold?

A: The fabric can easily support two people. Any more, and it gets kind of crowded, really.

Q: Is it as dangerous as it looks?

A: That depends on a number of factors, including how high the dancer is suspended and whether she has a spotter.

Q: Who can do aerial fabrics?

A: Men and women of most ages, heights and weights.

Q: What are the benefits to aerial fabrics?

A: Increased strength and flexibility. Plus, it looks freakin' cool. Plus, it will help you get laid.

Q: Can I set it up in my home?

A: Do you have a 15-foot-plus ceiling with rafters and rigging hardware? Then, no.

Q: I'm really out of shape. Can I still do aerial fabrics?

A: For sure. The first lesson involves learning the appropriate stretches to prepare your body. You advance at your own pace.

Q: What do I need to wear to do aerial fabrics?

A: The performers usually wear stretchy, snugly-fitting clothes that expose their arms and feet.

Q: I'm afraid of heights. Can I still do aerial fabrics?

A: Best not.