

# How Midwestern Artists Push Back

React, repair, and 'Re: Formation'

BY ATHENA COCOVES



Nick Azzaro, Ypsilanti, MI. 'Sticks & Stones', Classroom installation, desk chair from Ypsilanti, negative comments about his town left on MLive.com

It's Wednesday, July 27 and Donald J. Trump is in town. Jefferson Avenue is swarming with adoring supporters, curious bystanders and angry protesters. But across the street from the Huntington Center— where perhaps the most divisive man in contemporary U.S. politics will speak— One Lake Erie Center is calm and nearly empty. Artists walk in and out, some carrying canvases, others with sculptures, jugs containing contaminated water from Flint, desk chairs from Ypsilanti classrooms, TV screens and broken glass.

As the crowds for the political event swell, the artists continue to work, ignoring the surrounding circus, with only five days remaining to convert the 17,000 sq. foot space into a gallery for the group exhibition *Re: Formation*, on view throughout August.

## Recover and redistribute

The dual-site exhibit is presented by the Gallery Project, an Ann Arbor-based curatorial team led by Gloria Pritschet and Rocco DePietro, a duo who founded 'gallery of ideas' in 2005. Since then, they have curated shows at sites in the Ann Arbor and Detroit area.



Gloria Pritchet and Rocco DePietro in front of Cleveland artist Dana DePew's 'America's Creed', a silkscreen installation.

Last August, the Gallery Project came to Toledo for the group exhibit *WISH LIST*. *Re: Formation* will stay on view in Toledo for one month before traveling to the Ann Arbor Art Center for another month of exhibition. Despite structural similarities, the two have very different tones.

For *WISH LIST*, artists made works enacting human desire, but *Re: Formation* withholds that sense of yearning. Instead, *Re: Formation* gives nearly 60 regional and local artists space to express anger and frustration through art.

Works in the show, in various mediums, are thematically tied to perceived injustice and politically charged subjects, confronting socio-political events, like police shootings of the unarmed and the ongoing Flint water debacle.

## Replay and refocus

“People who have been silent are now standing up,” explains co-curator Gloria Pritschet. “There is a different attitude, more confrontational, we found in the work immediately.”

“There is a sense of mobilization, of movement, of pushback,” says co-curator Rocco DePietro. “We don’t want to just complain about the problems, we want to showcase those who are doing something.”

One of the artists who are “doing something” is Shanna Merola, a digital collage artist, who has worked with her art in cities, like Flint, to help interaction between community members and local police. Work from her series as a response to the Flint water crisis, appear in *Re: Formation*.



Shanna Merola. Detroit, MI. From the *'We All Live Downstream'* series. Archival inkjet pigment print.

Some opt for rich metaphors told through performance— like Melanie Mano's *'Loftie Bitch'* video installation— while others are more direct, providing strict, raw video footage— like Kate Levy's *'Here's To Flint'* documentary, tracing the history of the city's ongoing water crisis.

"This is how they protest. This happened and someone's got to see it, someone's got to notice it," says DePietro.

## Reject and reinform

Ypsilanti artist Nick Azzaro's provocative photograph, *'Progress at the Old Smith Furniture Building'* depicts a man waving a burning confederate flag in front of a downtown Ypsilanti building that has stood vacant for decades.



Nick Azzaro. Ypsilanti, MI. *'Progress at the Old Smith Furniture Building'*. Photographic print.

The photo, taken last summer, was in direct response to the Charleston church shooting and the debates that followed regarding display of the flag on state owned property.

“The ‘progress’ has to do with the confederate flag burning,” says Azzaro. “It’s all about progress in terms of doing away with this past— that some Americans still want to hold onto — that represents a pretty awful thing.”

Azzaro’s installation, *'Sticks & Stones'*, also on view, reacts to racist, vile and aggressive online comments about his town by covering a child-like figure sitting at a school desk with the anonymous attacks. “There is a sense of negativity... and this is a tangible way to represent it. It robs the kids of their innocence.”



Nick Azzaro, Ypsilanti, MI. 'Sticks & Stones', Classroom installation. Photo credit: Chin Azzaro.

## Reclaim and remember

A photograph of Frederick Douglass stretches across the back wall— at 15' x 12', it holds as an anchor. Hung upside down, the portrait of the social and civil rights reformer and abolitionist is stern and striking.



Yusuf Lateef. Toledo, OH. *'The Reconditioning'*. Photographic installation.

“It’s a distress call,” explains Toledo artist Yusuf Lateef, who installed the work, titled *The Reconditioning*’. Lateef explains the work is based on Douglass’s infamous 1852 Fourth of July Speech, the black statesman telling a crowd of white men that “This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”

“He spoke on behalf of the slaves when slavery was still legal,” explains Lateef. “He spoke about the Constitution, the forefathers and how the pursuit of happiness would have to apply to slaves if it was ever going to really be achieved.”

“My hope is that the work redirects our thoughts and how we look at history in the context of the present and ourselves,” says Lateef. “Slavery happened so long ago, that no one alive now was a slaveowner— but my great-grandmother was a slave.”

## Regroup and redirect

The significance of Douglass’ portrait is strengthened by his place as a historical icon. During the 19th century, Douglass made himself a most photographed African American man.

“He wanted to provide the right perception of the African American,” explains Lateef. “He looks very serious ... This photo is very distinguished.”

Douglass appears in formal clothing— decimating the more familiar image at the time of an African American as a slave. Now, issues of representation persist. The image of a young, black male is often tied to crime and violence, creating a dehumanizing and socially isolating experience, which serves as the subject of Lateef’s opening night performance piece. In a series of white stalls, plastered with photo collages of young black males, Lateef, and three collaborators, will welcome visitors as Douglass’s Fourth of July speech is recited.

“It will be very personal. We will be waiting, telling guests that we aren’t their enemy. They will be able to soak it all in, and it will be very intense for us,” says Kevin Gilmore Jr., another artist involved in the performance. Gilmore and Lateef will also be joined by artists Darren Mac and James Dickerson.

## Reenergize and repair

Gilmore worked with Lateef less than a year ago, performing this work at The Clazel in Bowling Green. Gilmore, also known as DaveKevinAdam, is a member of the tightly-knit group of local visual artists, rappers and writers called [Black Market Rx](#), their name a jab at the privatization of healthcare, offering art as their solution.

“Our view on healing is more holistic,” explains Chris Rogers, aka Blk Giraffe, another member of the collective. “We want to help ourselves, and the listener, by combining music and art to create something therapeutic.”

Black Market Rx explores emotions through painting, photography, film, music and poetry, relying on the separate medias to navigate the process.

“Different medias bring different energies out of me,” says member Charles Stoop, aka Marcus Whittington-Clark. “My photography is direct, and my writing is vague and subtle, but the emotion is there.”