

'Re: Formation' addresses social issues through art

Exhibit captures mood, mobilization of the disempowered

By ROBERTA GEDERT | BLADE STAFF WRITER

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Formation (**for-'mā-shən**) **n.** an arrangement of a body or group of persons or things in some prescribed manner or for a particular purpose.

Re: Formation (**re-fər-'mā-shən**) **n.** an exhibit of contemporary art in downtown Toledo that captures the mood and mobilization of those disempowered by unjust laws and practices, and social and economic transgressions.

The dual-site exhibition by Gallery Project of Ann Arbor opened in Toledo this week on the first floor of 1 Lake Erie Center, the former Lamson's department store at 600 Jefferson Ave. The installation remains through Aug. 31, at which time it moves to the Ann Arbor Art Center for a second showing that runs from Sept. 9 through Oct. 16.

An opening reception for the Toledo show, with live artistic performances and refreshments, will be from 5 to 9 p.m. Friday.

About 60 local and national videographers, painters, mixed media artists, and activists express themselves visually on the pushback and shifting views

surrounding such issues as access to safe drinking water, disparagement of the impoverished, the breakdown of relationships between law enforcement and African Americans, and the decay of urban infrastructure.

“When we wanted to express the meaning behind this exhibit ... we knew [the word] change was not sufficient,” said Gloria Pritschet, who owns the nonprofit Gallery Project with Rocco DePietro.

The pair, who routinely do dual-site exhibits in the Detroit and Ann Arbor areas and branch out into the region to show the displays, say that from the civil unrest after the 2014 shooting death by a white police officer of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., to the vulnerability of children during times of violence, “ordinary people are deciding enough is enough, this time we have to actually do something,” DePietro said.

“We thought about the sense of formation, the way the United States was formed, it had a lot of inequities in it that we are experiencing right now, and that we have been experiencing on and off. ... People are saying these things need to change,” Pritschet said. “The people who spoke up and who have suffered, that’s the change we felt — that people are pushing back.

“People are standing up who never did and are courageously trying to change.”

Artist Arturo Rodriguez’s mixed media pieces that are part of the exhibit are meant as strong visual reminders of the importance of water in our lives. The 43-year-old head of studio arts at the University of Toledo, came to the United States from Cuba by boat when he was just 7 years old. That experience plays into his work.

“The relationship with water here is very different [than in Miami where he grew up], but I think that’s changing, with the Flint water crisis, and our [Toledo] water crisis,” he said. “Water is one of the greatest attributes we have, and we are not doing a very good job of protecting it.

“We ourselves are 78 percent water; it’s incredibly important and I want people to start thinking about it differently.”



Arturo Rodriguez, *78%*

The Flint water crisis — where the government failed to properly monitor the water supply from the river, resulting in thousands of citizens being exposed to high lead levels — is a resounding theme in the gallery, including a large display of glass jars and bottles filled with water from Flint faucets, an essay about water’s involvement in every aspect of life by artist Mark Bleshenski.

Manipulated and distorted bottles represent the effects of the lead’s toxicity; data from lead measurements taken from homes there are labeled across some of the bottles as a reminder to the viewer of the seriousness of the breach.

Flint artist Ken Milito documents the “water warriors” through the painting *John and Sandy*, a depiction of two of the many volunteers who fought for safe water during the public health threat. They are shown in the foreground with brown water dripping from a hose while other citizens and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, complete with a serpentine-like costume, make up the backdrop of the piece.

Part of the exhibition plays off human interaction with nature, such as the photography subset of Darryl Baird, a Flint photographer, who showcases photos at a creek-bed system there, how nature has reclaimed sewer lines and other infrastructure installed by man



Darryl Baird installing

Swartz Creek Christmas Even Toxic Spill

DePietro and Pritschet also offered pieces for the show, including the painting, *Uprising*, by DePietro, which captures ordinary people engaging in standoffs with police, the larger forms in the painting meant to be symbols of power and resistance.

“We sense there is more pushback, more confrontations right now in a society, so this picks up on some of that,” he said.

In addition to Rodriguez, about a dozen Toledo artists are participating in the show, including Yusuf Lateef, Doug Kampfer, Jeremy Link, Jefferson Nelson, and fellow UT professors Barry Whittaker and Dan Hernandez.

Hernandez stepped somewhat away from his usual paintings with a video game and early Christian era feel to paint *Radical*, a series of five tanks created by deconstructing the blueprints that come with toy tanks and reconstructing them on large Tyvek house wrap paper. He said his works for the show play off the reformation of his view on violence since becoming an adult and having kids, and recognizing that while he is attracted to video games and toys that emanate violence, he now is also scared by it at the same time.

“I wanted them to be life sized so they would be ominous,” he said of *Radical*. “So there’s always this element of violence but informative by toys rather than actual violence.”

As I get older, it becomes a little more clear that what intrigues me is the absolute relentlessness of nature — when you can walk away from a house for a year and come back to it, and nature will have reclaimed it,” he said.

The exhibition will be open from noon to 6 p.m. Thursdays; from noon to 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; and from noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. The show will also be open from noon to 6 p.m. Aug. 29-31 before it moves out.

For more information, go to thegalleryproject.com. Contact Roberta Gedert at: rgedert@theblade.com or 419-724-6075 or on Twitter [@RoGedert](https://twitter.com/RoGedert).