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After Flint Water Crisis, Police Murders, and More, Midwestern Artists Get Mad

by [Sarah Rose Sharp](#) on August 24, 2016



Nick Azzaro, “Progress at the Ol’ Smith Furniture Building” (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

TOLEDO, Ohio — Midwesterners are many things, but they aren’t, as a rule, complainers. Rust Belt cities have taken hard times on the chin; as a bicoastal interloper, I’ve learned through long exposure that complaints about anything, from the ravages of late capitalism to the ungodly hot summer weather, will generally be met by native Midwesterners with a desultory shrug and a “that’s life,” attitude. Sure, times are tough, but the prevailing sense is that it would be a bit beneath our collective dignity to say so. Taken in that context, this year’s [Gallery Project, Re:Formation](#) — the fourth annual installation of this largely regional art exhibition — is the Midwestern equivalent of flipping a cafeteria table in a Hulk-like rage.

The show's theme solicited submissions running along dramatic and political lines, touching on broad and flagrant issues of social injustice — in sharp contrast to last year's [Wish List](#), which elicited fairly optimistic and personal presentations. This shift in tone was the expressed ambition of the show's co-curators and longtime exhibition-makers, [Rocco DePietro](#) and [Gloria Pritschet](#). "Last time there was this focus on hope," Pritschet told Hyperallergic. "But starting in the fall [of 2015], something shifted, where people who had never spoken out began standing up, and we felt we needed to re-form around that concept."



John James Anderson, 'The Cat and the Splat,' board book (detail view)

Remember, Midwesterners do not complain. For people to stand up in protest, it takes truly dire circumstances, like [the decades of systemic oppression](#) that set the stage for Detroit's infamous 1967 Rebellion, or, more recently, the slow-dawning horror of the [Flint Water Crisis](#) — the latter being the subject of many of the pieces on display in Gallery Project's 17,000-square-foot former Lamson's department store in downtown Toledo. The grief, anger, and betrayal felt over the situation in Flint, articulated by artists throughout the region and the nation, is expressed in *Re:Formation* through a multitude of media: documentary video footage by Detroit artist and cultural archivist [Kate Levy](#); a comic book starring a Flint family rendered as whimsical woodland creatures, by Philadelphia artist [Meg Lemieur](#) with Beehive Design Collective; and, arrestingly, in "Plumbum," a large-scale installation by Bay City artist [Mark Bleshenski](#). The piece, which dominates the center of the gallery floor, is a collection of water samples from Flint, tagged with locational data and displayed in myriad oddly warped vessels atop raw wooden stools of varying heights.



Mark Bleshenski, “Plumbum,” installation and detail views (click to enlarge)

“The shift started, for me, with the shooting of Tamar Rice,” said DePietro; race politics also figure heavily into a number of the works on display. The opening night party featured an interactive performance piece by Toledo-based community art activist [Yusuf Lateef](#), in collaboration with Kevin Gilmore, Daren Mac, and James Dickerson. The performance element of “The Reconditioning” took place within an installation inside one of the former department store’s street-facing display windows, with a series of booths facing amalgamated images of black male faces. As the title would suggest, the performance was an effort to reprogram conditioned responses to black males, against whom the longstanding legacy of unjustified violence is currently — with the pervasiveness of digital video — beginning to receive due outcry. Ypsilanti-based artist [Nick Azzaro](#)’s contribution (also the show’s banner image), “Progress at the Ol’ Smith Furniture Building,” depicts a black man wielding a burning Confederate flag in front of an abandoned building in downtown Ypsilanti — among other things, perhaps a parody of the ways in which the process of [gentrification](#) receives more media attention than that of racial justice.



A collection of works by Sheida Soleimani (click to enlarge)

Just adjacent to Azzaro's piece, a multimedia installation by Rhode Island-based artist [Sheida Soleimani](#) draws in the viewer with works highlighting the plight of Iranian woman who have been executed without due process. As the child of [Iranian political refugees](#) (her father fled political persecution and her mother was imprisoned and tortured during the search for him), Soleimani approaches a social justice art practice from a deeply personal standpoint. The digital collage works that act as counterpoint to the oversize soft sculpture form a conversation within a little triangle of works in this section of the exhibition, all by female digital collage artists — including selections from *We All Live Downwind* by the highly political Hamtramck artist [Shanna Merola](#), and “Future Seasons,” a more personal but no less eerie composition by photographer and digital collagist [Morgan Barrie](#).

These are just a few of the moments offered up by *Re:Formation*, which includes works by more than 50 artists. Gallery Project continues to impress with its breadth, depth, and focus. One cannot window-shop this exhibition without coming away with an overwhelming sense that the participating artists have reached their limits. Gun violence, environmental injustice, inequality, gerrymandering, gentrification, and war are just a handful of major themes in a room veritably simmering with Midwestern rage — rage that feels all the more palpable and terrifying in light of the locals' usual restraint.



Shanna Merola, 'We All Live Downwind' series, 1-6, archival inkjet pigment prints



Morgan Barrie, "Future Seasons," digital composite, archival inkjet print (detail view)

[Re:Formation](#) is on view at 600 Jefferson Avenue, Toledo, Ohio, through August 30; it then moves to a second location, at the [Ann Arbor Art Center](#), from September 9 to October 16.