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SUPERFAN

patrick mcdonough

Two artists chat about ping pong, playgrounds, and philosophy
interview by **kenny george** photography by **joshua yospyn**

Patrick McDonough and Kenny George work hard, play hard. Literally. Patrick's varied repertoire involves everything from the consequences of target practice to the transformation of Flashpoint Gallery into a full-scale rec room complete with a combination foosball, ping pong table and a tribute to Coors Light. Amongst a slew of game-play inspired art, Kenny has completed the development of his own Pacman-inspired game, including an arcade table-top setup to boot, and is currently creating a fine art pogo app for the iPhone. So, what's next? Worn Magazine asked Kenny to grill Patrick on the interplay of sports, music, beer and art - and what that all means for Patrick's practice.

Kenny George: Patrick, where did you grow up?

Patrick McDonough: I'm from Madison, Wisconsin, which is city a lot like DC - very liberal, hyper-educated populous, activist bent.

KG: How do you think your upbringing affects the type of artwork you make?

PM: You're not surrounded by very many people interested in making contemporary art, and it gives you this self awareness that you're participating in this anomalous behavior. At the same time, you have this Midwestern pragmatism, as in: there is this art thing and it must be useful because it continues to exist, but I'm not really sure what that use is. That is where this usability factor in our works happens.

KG: Given that you grew up in a pragmatic culture and a culture that didn't really put a lot of stock in conceptual art, how do you think you've found your way to conceptual art?

PM: I don't know, that's a mystery. I'm looking at stuff and interacting in the world and existing in the world. My brain is processing all of that and

somewhere along the line, neurons line up, and you have an idea.

KG: It's tough when it's a million dollar question, why do we do what we do?

PM: That is the ultimate question, right? Why are you a musician? Or why don't you write books? What I like about art is that it functions outside of descriptive language. What you make has a meaning, but it's not really functioning at the language level that we normally talk and think and write in.

KG: That's interesting. Art operates in a way without those parameters. Is that what you're getting at?

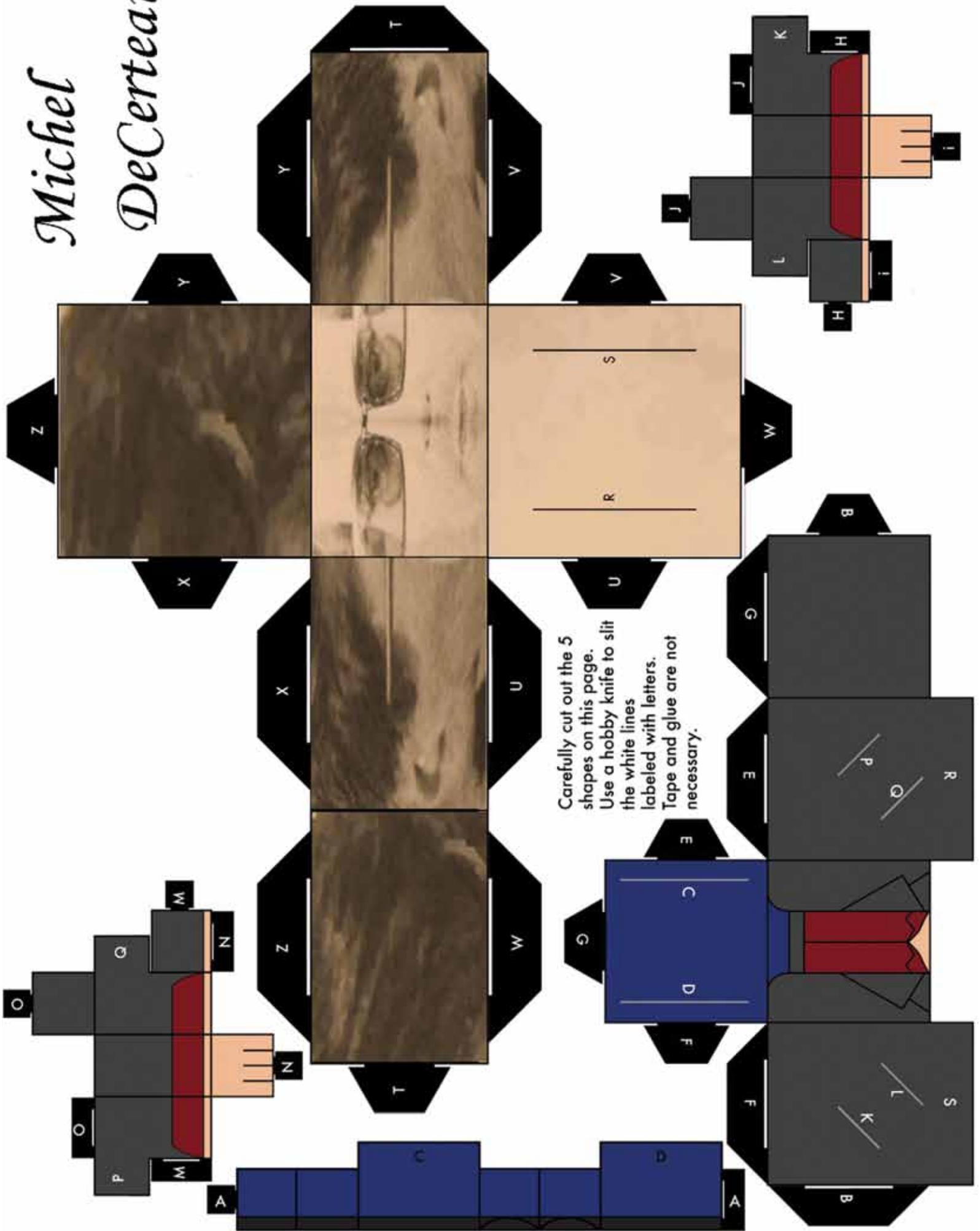
PM: I don't know if it's about parameters, but I gravitated toward it because I have this affinity for how an art object functions in a world much differently than anything else you do in the world.

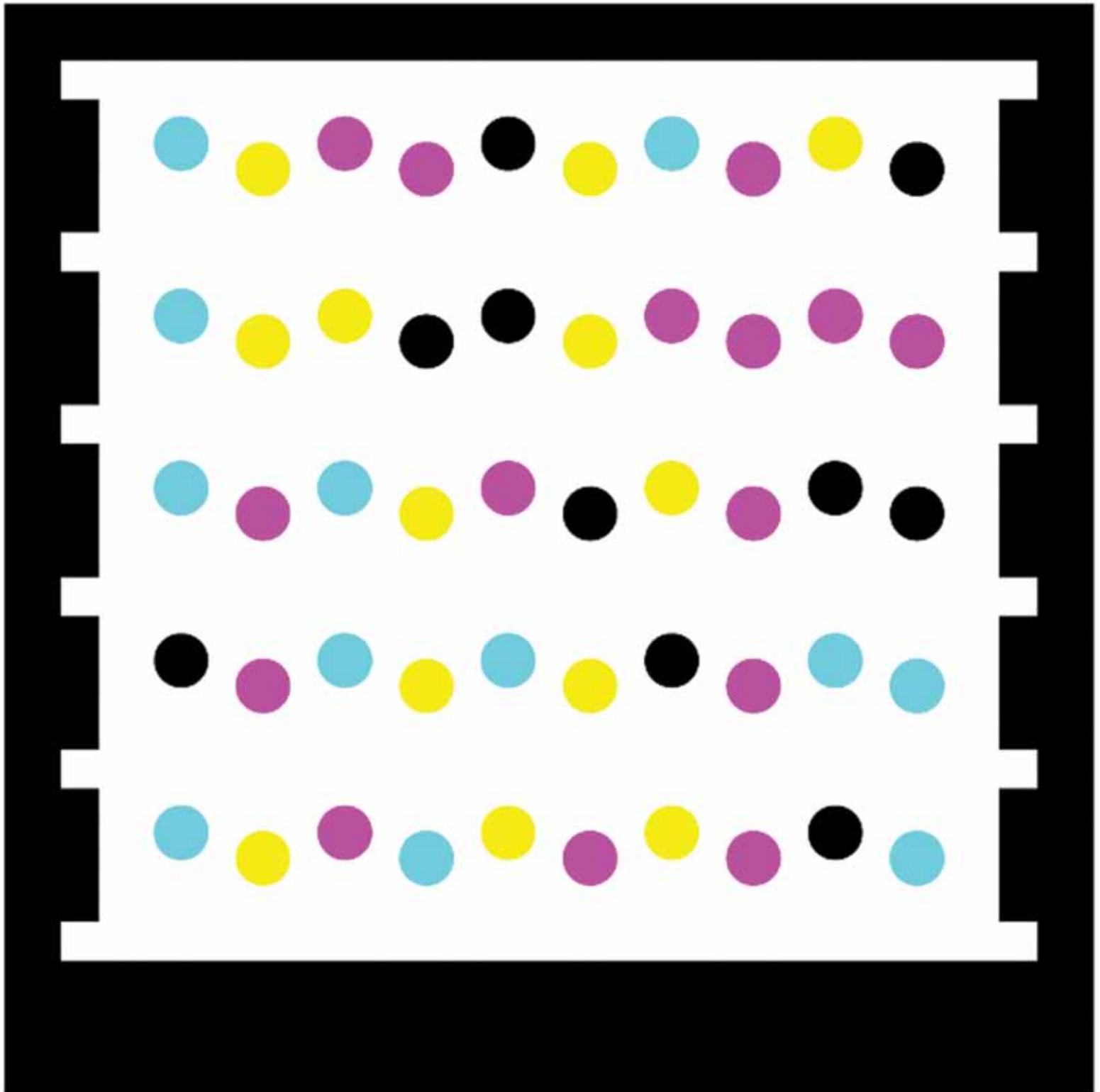
KG: To help people understand your work a little better, let's address your practice. You're more of a project based artist and your work varies greatly from one project to the next. Are there themes or concerns that unify your overarching practice?

PM: I think it's this existential thing. Art is really interesting to me because it's so contested. People say, 'Art is this one thing, art should have this social use-value. It should try and function outside of capitalism, it should be aesthetically pleasing objects to be sold to make money for the maker, it cannot be...' It's this crazy context that gets grouped under this one word.

I like to look at my own compulsions and affinities and start to look at the way other people are behaving to try and figure out, for both of us, what might be happening and why this exists. So, I think, deep down my work is about these

Michel DeCerteau





(Point and shoot.)

A yellow sculpture is the central focus, set in a cluttered workshop. The sculpture consists of a wide, flat base with four small yellow knobs at the corners. A rectangular block sits on top of the base, featuring the text 'YOUNGER THAN JESUS ARTIST' in bold, black, sans-serif font. Above this block are two vertical yellow pillars, each topped with a small yellow knob. A wider yellow band connects the tops of these pillars. At the very top is a tall, slender yellow column that ends in a decorative, fluted yellow cap. The background shows a workshop with wooden framing, a whiteboard with faint drawings, a vacuum cleaner, a fire extinguisher, and various tools and materials.

**YOUNGER
THAN JESUS
ARTIST**



really big themes, and because they're so big and unwieldy, the project thing happens. I think, I'm going to try this set of things and see how that works out, see how people react. My work is super-silly postmodern, viewer completes the artwork stuff, but I can't really start to understand it until I get feedback.

KG: You mentioned that you're responding to your viewers and making things that they can digest. Who is that audience? Or who do you aim to make work for?

PM: I hope I make work that has layers that reach a lot of people. I am participating in contemporary art, so I want that audience, but I also want to problematize that audience, and say, why don't you like sports? Or if you do, why do you like sports and art? Or say, why do you normally not touch art? What happens when you get to touch the art? I also really like the accessibility for non-art people because I think if you make work about stuff that is atypical art fodder, like Pacman --

KG: And foosball --

PM: And foosball, or pinball and Dan Marino and Shaquille O'Neal and beer. I like these in-betweens, and so I almost like to place the work right on an in-between for a couple of audiences. With the Flashpoint show, I had this work with sports posters, foosball, and beer, rugs and scented candles - that sits right on the line between. Art people are into non-skilled made stuff, but they don't really like this - this is a super generalization - they don't love normal person art, about normal, middle class upbringing stuff that's easily identifiable. Then maybe your typical non-art viewer doesn't love non-skill based art, but they identify with the sports and the foosball. That is a really hard line to walk, so I ultimately want it to be super accessible, but really intellectualized, simultaneously.

KG: Why do you make very direct references to contemporary artists in your work that addresses a very small percentage of your viewers?

PM: It's fan behavior. I read art blogs and Artnet and ARTINFO. Some people know baseball and some people know auction results, and I'm more the latter than the former. I try and do the contemporary art reference thing in an in-between, liminal way. Take the rugs at the Flashpoint show, Aaron Curry is a defensive end for the Seattle Seahawks, but he [visual artist Aaron Curry] is also this hip LA artist, and so when you as a viewer see the name Aaron Curry, what do you think of?

KG: Fan behavior is a collective experience, but it's also a highly individualized experience. You did a piece for your thesis exhibition where you published a list of everything that was on your iPod. That's a unique, individual experience because that is your fan experience of music, it's one of a kind. Do you see the art references playing into that? It's your collection of everything that you admire about music, art and sports, and it creates a sense of authorship.

PM: And it's this anxiety of influence. Here is this burden of 600 years of post-Renaissance art history, looming there. How do you navigate it? How do you make a thing, an object or an art thing in the face of that? It's pretty daunting, right? I try and make something, I finish and look at it, and I think, no, that's just this other thing that already exists. Fan behavior replaces the actual, at least in the moment.

KG: Fan behavior can be less of a bi-product and more of an end result. What role does aesthetics play in all of this?

PM: I don't seem to make things very well as a general impulse, I don't know if I get fidgety as I'm doing lots of things, or if it's that I just don't really like refined objects. I make a lot of stuff myself, by hand, and I'm not prone to over-engineering and over-planning as I go. If I'm going to make something, I just start it, and then deal with it as it goes on. I don't want my art to participate in the world in this refined way because there are so many machined, consumer goods in the world. It's important how it was made and what it is made of - that imparts meaning. That in combination with what your eyes are experiencing. I think those three parts are almost equal: how it is made, what it is made of and what the thing actually looks like.

KG: When I first met you four years ago, you were doing, I don't know if you could call them paintings, but they were constructed of as many handmade techniques as one could fit on one canvas. It was very much about custom making and crafting, which plays largely in this culture of fan or hobby. You're validating what a lot of people do for their leisure as a form of important cultural commentary. It seems to me, a lot of what you're doing is giving credence to all forms of culture, not just setting the parameters at visual, musical or sports, but saying it all meets at this common ground, and using the visual arts culture as a forum for conversation to happen and inviting all to participate in that. Would you talk about your upcoming show?

PM: My next show is at Civilian Art Projects. It's this music fan show. I did the iPod book, but this is a more distilled music fan show. There are going to be four pieces in the show. I'm color matching #665667 at Home Depot and then painting that on the wall. That refers to the Soundgarden songs 665 and 667, where they were poking fun at and utilizing backmasking. There have always been people saying that if you play a Beatles record backward it says, 'We love the devil,' or if you play Slayer records backward, they are inculcating youth with demonic sentiments. Soundgarden just messed with everybody and put, 'We love Santa,' on these songs. There is also a backmasked sound piece where I reversed the audio of a Bob Ross episode that is going to be available on custom record. Then, there is a bird house sculpture based on the Smart Studios building in Madison. It's this innocuous brick building where Butch Vig mixed Sparklehorse and Nirvana and all of these seminal early 90's records, so it's like a music studio for birds. Then, I'm doing a tattoo piece where I'm having lyrics tattooed on my back. It will be represented in the gallery space by my will that will gift the skin to someone as yet undetermined. When I die, someone will get that skin. ■