

# Detroit Free Press

## NYC artist Gary Simmons papers Detroit with vintage music posters

By, Mark Stryker, Detroit Free Press Staff Writer  
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Artist Gary Simmons was deep into music growing up in New York. He was especially fascinated with cities that were producing innovative musicians, new sounds and styles and independent scenes. Los Angeles was like that. Washington, D.C. too. And, of course, Detroit.

"From the time I was a teenager, Detroit was always a place that I looked at that had this super-rich music foundation," said Simmons, speaking by phone from New York. "Everything from Motown to house music and techno. This was an incredible city that has all of this history — the MC5, the Stooges, you name the techno DJ. It just keeps going and going and going.

"I've always wanted to do an installation in Detroit."

At 52, Simmons is getting his wish. The celebrated artist, known for exploring ideas of race, culture and class through drawing, sculpture and installation, is creating a site-specific work in a vacant storefront at 1301 Broadway (at Gratiot), next door to longtime neighborhood resident Henry the Hatter. The exhibition, which opens to the public on Thursday, is an immersive environment created from hundreds of old-school concert posters, evocative of the late '60s through the early '80s. Simmons alters them and uses them to coat the walls in a vibrant wash of saturated color, typography and memory.

The posters, which Simmons collected at flea markets or from the Internet, are digitally scanned and transformed through erasures, tears and color manipulations. About a dozen of them are Detroit-centric, referencing bands like the MC5 or Hot Rod-theme events. The effect promises to be a hallucinatory mosaic — the erasures, juxtapositions and repetitions evoking a disorienting haze of distorted memories and scrambled context.

The exhibition arrives as part of Culture Lab Detroit 2016, a two-day conference including panel discussions and projects centered on the role of design in reshaping Detroit.

In its fourth year, Culture Lab typically includes a community-based project or exhibition that moves beyond the public panels and private networking dinners. The Simmons installation, which will remain open through the end of the year, connects with the 2016 conference theme of "walls" — an exploration of architectural structures, interior spaces and barriers that separate us from each other based on race, culture, gender, politics and class.

The installation was commissioned by Culture Lab Detroit in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit and Dan Gilbert's Bedrock Real Estate Services. Culture Lab was founded by Birmingham resident Jane Schulak and is funded by a consortium of foundations, businesses, individuals and others.

Simmons has had one-man shows at the Studio Museum of Harlem, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and the Perez Art Museum in Miami, and his work has appeared in leading museum shows around the world. Detroiters who saw the "30 Americans" touring exhibition of contemporary African-American artists at the Detroit Institute of Arts last year will certainly remember seeing his work, even if they can't recall his name. Simmons' "Duck, Duck, Noose" (1992) is a devastating installation in which Ku Klux Klan hats sit on stools in a classroom-like circle — while an empty noose hangs in the center.



Gary Simmons, a mixed-media artist from New York, right, works with his assistant, Elijah Ford, 27, of Detroit to install Simmons' "site specific room installation" in a vacant store front in downtown Detroit on Monday, Sept. 12, 2016. Simmons says he wants the viewer to be "completely immersed" in the installation as they enter the space." (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

Simmons' best-known works are his so-called erasure drawings, in which he takes popular culture images rooted in racial stereotypes, like those from old cartoons, and renders them in chalk on slate and then rub parts of them away. MOCAD executive director Elysia Borowy-Reeder said that new Detroit installation would draw similarly on themes of identity and uncertainty, while referencing Detroit music history and employing the artist's newer medium of the printed, transformed poster.

Simmons has created similar installations in London, San Francisco and Aspen, though the Detroit version will be the largest in the series to date.

"The whole premise of the work is the act of mining histories, and in this case it's music," said Simmons. "The posters are specific to a time when the way we received information about subcultures — about bands playing, records dropping and things like that — you'd hear about through fliers on the street. I always loved the graphic qualities of those posters. To get somebody's attention you had to have a really strong image."

Simmons laments the speed of today's digital culture. Almost as soon as a piece of music is created, it's distributed all over the world via the Internet. When information traveled more slowly, the relative isolation made it easier for distinctive local scenes to develop, rather than everything being absorbed quickly into a more generic digital stream of popular culture.

Simmons' installation meditates on these issues, giving the illusion of a predigital age, as well as touching subtly on politics and identity. Simmons said the work hovers between representation and abstraction.



Detroit posters are used in Gary Simmons' site specific room installation in a vacant store front in downtown Detroit on Monday, Sept. 12, 2016. Simmons says he wants the viewer to be "completely immersed" in the installation as they enter the space. " (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

"Your memory sort of bridges the gaps between the abstract and representation," he said. "When you recall something, it's not a true memory. You're patching in certain areas, and there are parts disappearing the further you get from the experience. The same thing happens with these posters. You can vaguely decipher what band it is, but not the location. You're filling the gaps. ...

"I love the way the posters layer over one another, offering bits and pieces, shards of the past."

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