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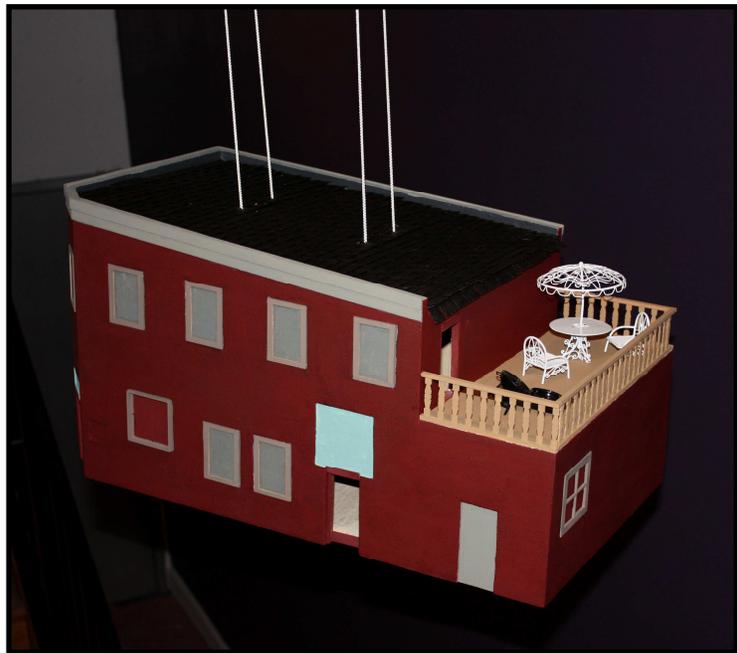
## Galleries: Patrick McDonough's 'Opening Act' at Civilian Art Projects

*By Kriston Capps*

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Twenty years ago — 1991, the Year Punk Broke — the city of Madison, Wis., changed the music industry, and my life, forever. People like to geolocate the alternative rock epicenter farther west, in Seattle, where bands like Soundgarden and Nirvana played their first barre chords. But producer Butch Vig, the legendary blacksmith who wrought the best alternative rock of the '90s, forged albums like Nirvana's "Nevermind" and Smashing Pumpkins' "Gish" in Madison. Seattle made the bands, but Madison made the sound.

Before it closed last May, Smart Studios in Madison stood as a mecca for rock fans like me, whose adolescence was soundtracked by the records Vig produced there. Like the other preteen citizens of the Alternative Nation, I marshaled whatever purchasing power I could muster to help make Madison's records go gold. I bought posters and T-shirts. I may have been dimly aware that someone, somewhere, was cashing in on the alternative energy that made me and so many others unique — but oh well, whatever, never mind.



Artist Patrick McDonough gets it. For a show that hangs in the entryway to Civilian Art Projects — an alternative take on a mainstream space — McDonough has employed a Tower Records' worth of alt-art strategies, from tattoo ink to latex house paint. If the work winds up feeling hollow, there's

a reason for that. McDonough makes the commercial distribution of art his business, nearly to the exclusion of any other artistic concern.

That much is clear from “112003-birdhouse,” McDonough’s reproduction of Smart Studios. This dollhouse-like model, complete with patio furniture and roof shingles, hangs in the entryway over the stairs leading to Civilian on the second floor. It’s a devotion not only to the artist’s childhood (McDonough grew up in Madison) but to the aesthetic revolution of the early 1990s. His focus isn’t the independent musician but the independent music studio — one rent-seeker among many who set up shop outside the temple of the counterculture.



McDonough is young enough that he probably remembers the perpetual teenage fretting over artists selling out. His art, in any case, is made in that paranoid style. For “112303-accent wall,” a work that many viewers are bound to overlook, McDonough has painted a wall inside the narrow entryway purple.

It’s his homage to Soundgarden’s “Ultramega OK,” the band’s 1988 studio debut album. The record features tracks by the names of “665” and “667.” As a response, McDonough painted the wall at Civilian with latex house paint to match the Photoshop color 665667 and, for \$20 to \$50 per square foot, he will paint any wall you like the same shade of purple.

Leigh Conner, the namesake of Conner Contemporary Art, where McDonough is employed, mentioned during the show’s opening that she might purchase a McDonough work — by asking him to paint parts of the wall obscured by other artworks hanging in her home. McDonough’s show is rife with potential for this kind of subversive humor.

For example, “112303-tattoo” — note McDonough’s titling convention, seemingly devised to frustrate newspaper editors — cannot be sold at all. For this piece, he had song lyrics (“DAMN RIGHT I’LL RISE AGAIN”) tattooed across his back, just as the character does in the Hold Steady song from which he borrowed the line. If he were to attempt to sell this patch of skin as art, he would be violating human-trafficking laws: pretty alternative. Instead, he drew up a will pledging the marked-up skin off his lower back to an institution to be named at a later date. (He named his partner, Leah Hunter, as the executor.)

McDonough only includes one conventional art object in the show: “110202-vinyl record,” a custom-cut pressing in an edition of 25, of backmasked audio from an episode of “The Joy of Painting.” He’s made a cult vinyl object featuring audio played backward, a play on the subversive potential of pop that, in this case, stars art’s least threatening painter, Bob Ross.

The piece again references Soundgarden: Play “665” backward and you’ll hear someone saying “I love Santa.” The band had the foresight to know that it would fall short of the evil that metal was supposed to represent. After that release, Soundgarden became the first of the alternative bands to sign to a major label.

Why should McDonough make these overthought artworks to prove an academic point about how alternative music was a commercial distribution category, not an aesthetic realm? The show teeters on the verge of wonky. But one moment that rescues it from utter cynicism: an errant brush stroke of paint that appears on McDonough’s otherwise featureless chipboard album sleeves.

It might be inspired by Bob Ross or it might be inspired by Gerhard Richter. It doesn’t much matter where it came from. McDonough’s gestural abstraction bursts forth like a blistering guitar solo from Soundgarden axman Kim Thayil in an MTV Buzz Bin clip. The mark is a feature of the packaging, but it still rings true. For work so narrowly construed and academically predetermined as McDonough’s to yield even fleetingly to something so raw is a revelation.

McDonough’s hardly the only neurotic to get worked up about how the industry works. But through his art, he’s not expressing judgment. McDonough sympathizes with the vulnerability of the earnest fan and acknowledges the inevitability of commercial accretion that follows artistic breakthroughs.

Glenn Gould once said, “A record is a concert without halls and a museum whose curator is the owner.” That was before David Geffen and other moguls got their hands on the music industry in the ’90s. Contemporary art is just as vulnerable to posturing, from execs and artists alike. Despite it all, McDonough still manages to work in a good riff.