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Shapes for Hamilton, by New York City artist Allan McCollum, is on display Friday at Colgate University's Little Hall.

Shapes for Hamilton exhibit explores identity, community at Colgate University

By Alaina Potrikus

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A New York City artist has brought the 6,048 members of the greater Hamilton community into one room.

Shapes for Hamilton, an exhibit by Allan McCollum, is a collection of unique black and white two-dimensional shapes that will be on display this month at Colgate University's Clifford Gallery.

McCollum created the community art project using Adobe Illustrator and a method that could allow him to produce enough unique shapes for every person on the planet at peak population – roughly 31 billion. The number of shapes in the exhibit at Colgate matches the number of residents in Hamilton.

So far, he has made about 214 million shapes. No two are alike and the collection contains no mirrored images. They are circular and square, curved and angular, with alterations that are just different enough to make them each individual.

The interactive gallery experience allows visitors to find their shape in a database, trace it on a name tag that reads, "Hello, My Shape Is," and find it on the walls covered with 1,400-square-feet of shapes.



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Colgate Professor DeWitt Godfrey said the project celebrates the commonness of being unique. Looking at the walls – one which includes 105 columns of the printed images that stretch from floor to ceiling – it is easy to get lost in both the overall size and the individual complexity.

"In a crowd, from afar, all people look the same," Godfrey explained. "But up close, we are all completely different."

Though McCollum's shapes have been carved from wood, made into cookie cutters and ornaments, hand-drawn as silhouettes and on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Hamilton showing will be the first time the individual pieces of art will be gifted to their intended recipient.

In early April, the shapes will be distributed free of charge to Hamilton residents. Godfrey said the images could be used as inspiration for a tattoo or posted to a Facebook page. McCollum suggests using the identity markets to create insignias, logos or emblems.

Seeing how others decide to use the shapes is part of the collaboration, Godfrey said.

"The success of the project is gauged on how many people participate," Godfrey said. "You and the shape will always be connected. Just like you were produced only once, that shape will be produced only once."