

# MOMIUS

— A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM —

## A NEW LEVEL OF ANXIETY IN DEREK LIDDINGTON

BY [DAGMARA GENDA](#) • [REVIEWS](#) • OCTOBER 5, 2015

After seeing Derek Liddington's solo show at *aka artist-run* in Saskatoon, I immediately went home to reread the first article I wrote on his work, published five years ago in BlackFlash Magazine. At the time I was responding to what was, and perhaps still is, Liddington's penchant for referential opacity. I argued that he was more interested in signature than purposeful chains of allusion. Citing Giorgio Agamben, I proposed that a signature bridges a system of signs with its use, and can thus describe the ineffable quality of things like, for example, fashion. This was Liddington's strategy: he used signatures, whether it was a haircut or a graffiti tag, to insert his practice into a larger cultural history, and by doing so, stole a little bit of its cachet. Even now his web of references are more emotive than intellectual. They aren't meant to be read though they're about the simultaneous acts of reading and misreading.

However his current exhibition, the lengthily-titled *It wasn't until we closed our eyes that we could finally see what was there all along*, opts for a more personal approach to a familiar strategy. Liddington trades idolizing references to contemporary art and culture for something more immediate and idiosyncratic: ad-hoc combinations of genre, discipline, personal history, and free association. His focus remains the chain of influence that has preoccupied him from the beginning of his career to the present moment where it has reached, to summon Harold Bloom, a new level of anxiety.

On the surface, Liddington's show looks steely and cool, the trademark of many exhibitions at his representing gallery, Daniel Faria. A tall lob-sided mass of unfired clay slopes near the entrance while balls of it litter the floor. Monochrome graphite drawings on un-stretched canvas are draped across the walls. Only upon closer inspection can you

eke out a smudged still-life within: a cluster of grapes, an apple, a banana. The only color in the room comes from a set of gel-capped lights, some of which are set on the floor, spreading dramatic spotlights across a blank wall. The crumbling monumentality of the show belies a suppressed erotics. While Liddington's titles spill emotional excess, the artist's chill aesthetic attempts to contain the underlying family drama.

Liddington first wrote himself into contemporary art by referencing the artists he admires and with whom he sought to share a stage (his allusions to theater are never incidental). Later he incorporated his father into a performance at Daniel Faria Gallery, explicitly tackling his own experience of Freud's "family romance" through the ever-repeating form of the Oedipal Complex. Now a father himself, Liddington takes on (what ends up being) the futile task of moulding, from memory, his son's face in clay. Despite four attempts, the likeness is not there. The dusty remnants of the small head are placed on an eye-level shelf dramatically lit by an overlay of blue that fractures into green and pink lines upon hitting the clay. The various iterations of the bust appear as inserts in a publication, co-produced by *aka*, that was part of a summer group show at Toronto's 8-11, *Flesh, Marble, Leaf and Twig*. Liddington additionally intervened in the book by flipping through its pages with hands dirtied by graphite, leaving chalky smears that later transfer to each subsequent reader. The accompanying statement at the beginning of the book is an overwrought memory, perhaps fictional, of eating red pistachio nuts as a child. The blatant, and perhaps somewhat egotistical, need to leave a mark plays out on each page as well as on the effigy of his child, whose visage the artist unsuccessfully attempts to shape.

Liddington's anxiety of influence has turned into an anxiety over the influence he exerts, especially since the effect of his actions remain unknown. This is not only the fear a father feels in raising his son, but also that of an artist making decisions in the studio. As Liddington's practice veers toward more tentatively collaborative approaches, he allows others to influence his work even as he retains authorship. At *aka*, Liddington hired four actors to shape a clay column in the gallery. An exercise in futility, the resulting phallic structure holds no similarity to an actual pillar. The documentation of the performance shows the actors, apparently playing union workers in a hypothetical opera, soaked in sweat, laboring to build the clay up toward the ceiling. The endeavor seems both comical and viscerally sexual. The moist slaps of clay echo through the room in an alienated evocation of the coital act. Finally, with no supporting framework, the wet mud begins to slope and slouch while the workers frantically try to save it from toppling over. At one point it curves to such an extreme that they break it at the center only to build it up again using an improvised slab technique. In the end, anxiety trumps desire. Their last-ditch effort to create some semblance of a column comes closer to parody than monumentality;

one actor moulds a butterfly into the structure's side while another fashions a pagoda-like summit.

If the monochrome still-life drawings that demarcate the boundaries of the exhibition have a specific function in the show, it might be in their reference to temporality – the sometimes moralizing theme in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings that reminded viewers not only of life's pleasure, but also its fleeting nature. Instead of adorning fruit with flies and shriveled rot, as was the custom in such paintings, Liddington allows it to exist unfixed in smudged clouds of graphite. The drawings were repurposed from *Today a Legend Died* (2012), the Oedipal exhibition at Daniel Faria where, dressed in custom "proletarian" uniforms, he rebuilt a '68 Ford Mustang with his father. Like the past exhibition, *It wasn't until...* romanticizes a form of exertion that can't quite find its place between labor and creation. The result is somewhat disjointed and in the end propositional. The artist makes work about the struggle of its own making but the effect remains unclear.

"When one hasn't had a good father, it is necessary to invent one," writes Bloom, citing Nietzsche in *The Anxiety of Influence* to explain that the return of one's intellectual precursors happens in their creative re-articulation. All artists – whether by imitation or outright rejection – deal with their particular cultural inheritance. In Liddington's case the anxiety has come home to its Freudian roots with the inclusion of his father in previous work, the semblance of his son in the current show, and by proxy, himself as both son and father. Work plays a role not only through the tentative position of artistic labor, but also its relation to the working-class roots of the artist's family. How does he fit within that lineage and how does he live up to its expectation? What expectations are placed on his son? How does his output function in a contemporary artworld? Who are his precursors?

Repeatedly, it seems, Liddington faces this anxiety by tackling the very concept of origins. This isn't for a belief in origins so much as a negotiation of the various positions he inhabits. Liddington, if we are to take Nietzsche seriously, has not yet invented the Father, though I think he very well intends to try. This anxiety isn't an inevitable struggle, but in Liddington's practice, it's at least a fruitful one. Perhaps his antimonies of desire and anxiety will eventually come to a head, and when they do, it will be fascinating to see which one wins out.

-Genda, Dagmara. "A New Level of Anxiety in Derek Liddington", *MOMUS*, October 5, 2015.