

TORONTO STAR

Derek Liddington at Cambridge Galleries, a New Romantic

A heart-on-his-sleeve Minimalist, Liddington is a youthful paradox with his first solo museum show in Cambridge



COLIN MCCONNELL / TORONTO STAR

Liddington, who grew up in Toronto and now teaches at OCAD University, is having his first solo museum show at Cambridge Galleries.

By: Murray Whyte Visual arts, Published on Sat Dec 07 2013

On the wall at the Cambridge Galleries, Derek Liddington's huge graphite wall drawing, rough and abstract, shimmers under the bright gallery lighting like the surface of dark water. Off to one side, though, is a telltale smudge: three fingerprints trailing down and away from the drawing's edge, marking a sheepish retreat.

"People can't stop touching it," Liddington, 32, explains. "It's been a huge problem from the gallery's point of view. But I kind of like it. It means people are really engaged with the material."

If it sounds like an odd reaction to what amounts to willful defacement — rule one of museums is and has always been: hands off — then you're starting to get the sense that Liddington's practice is out of the box.

Over the past few years, recent shows of his work have included ripping a gash in a red wall at the Monte Clark Gallery as the backdrop for two dueling pianists to face off in ever

accelerating performances of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run." Last year, at Daniel Faria, he trucked in the empty shell of a 1965 Mustang, built giant hanging abstract forms around it and then used the entire thing as a set to stage an opera he had written. (In the waning days of the show, Liddington worked feverishly with his father in the gallery to rebuild an engine, intending to install it in the car and drive it away, under its own steam. Didn't happen.) Liddington, who grew up in Toronto and now teaches at OCAD University, is young, impossibly ambitious and increasingly accomplished. The Cambridge show is his first solo museum show. You get the sense, though, that it's the first of many.

The Cambridge show is spare, with just three pieces. Still, he inaugurated it with a gesture fitting his experimental romanticism. Before the show opened late last month, Liddington marked his birthday, on Nov. 21, by having a crane hoist a 136-kilogram round steel disc in the air, tracking the slow movement of the sun across the sky.

Which brings us to the title of the show: *Every Moment Can Be Traced Back to the First Time the Sun Touched My Face*. "I don't remember ever seeing a full sunset," he says. "There's something about that idea, about believing in something we could never see or understand."

If Liddington sounds like something of a romantic poet, it's a description he wouldn't deny. But in Cambridge, his three works are large but minimal, shimmering grey under bright light, cold steel on the floor and fabric draped on steel rods.

There's a powerful connection to material, things being made by hand. The drawing, drawn straight onto the wall in moody steely-dark graphite tones, took a team of more than a dozen people four days to finish; a tapestry of sewn scraps of fabric, suspended by angular rods in evocative folds, was knitted together by a team of seamstresses (Liddington hand-rubbed graphite into the fabric later, streaking it with steely grey detail). Nearby, that steel disc lies on the ground, graphite smeared in an arc on the wall nearby: almost like footprints, a telltale sign of the artist's repetitive, laborious gesture of rubbing the material into the wall.

The signposts are easy enough to read: of Minimalism and its priorities in the material, the handmade and implied labour. Abstraction and its revolutionary associations across a couple of eras are a presence here, too: Russian Constructivists, who used abstraction to signal a new world order in the wake of the revolution, or the Abstract Expressionists, who, post-Second World War, did much the same thing with their rough use of materials and rejection of representation. (A direct reference was Liddington's last show at Daniel Faria, in November, which included a suite of graphite drawings on paper aimed at transmitting some of that contact high of the paintings of Mark Rothko.)

That work was beyond words, or so they said: a visceral place of pure emotion. Liddington takes that on board and drives it somewhere new.

Titles are a bit of a thing. If the drawing were simple mimicry of a bygone era — Sol LeWitt's famous wall drawings, say — it might have been called *Untitled* or simply assigned a number. Instead, it's called (deep breath) *All I could do to control my anger was stare at the endless beauty of the sun as it spilled over the horizon. All I could do to control my love was stare at the endless beauty of the sun as it spilled over the horizon.*

The fabric's material presence is similarly freighted with the artist's poetic impulse: taken down and splayed flat, Liddington says its hundreds of stitched together, angular fabric pieces portray a classic opera — boys meets girl, love ensues, then the inevitable tragedy — though draped and clustered, the meaning is obscured.

In his work, Liddington forces together two opposites, crafting a unique space for himself. Call it romantic conceptualism and you wouldn't be wrong. "It's a matter of trying to infuse emotional content, narrative content, into the work," he says. "How much complex can it be if I lead you to it with story? It's not a popular term," he says, almost apologetically, "but how romantic can a moment be?"

Derek Liddington: Every Moment Can Be Traced Back to the First Time the Sun Touched My Face continues at Cambridge Galleries, 1 North Square, Cambridge, ON, until Jan. 12.

-Whyte, Murray. "Derek Liddington at Cambridge Galleries, a New Romantic", Toronto Star, Saturday, December 7, 2013.