Daniel Faria Gallery

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Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto
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by Ellyn Walker

Revolution is the starting point for Derek Liddington's solo exhibition at Daniel Faria Gallery, *Today a Legend Died. Viva La Revolution*, in which the artist filters this theme through autobiography and world history. Consequently, the show—which comprises a '68 Mustang coupe, performances and nine framed graphite line drawings—understands revolution expansively, by considering its personal, cultural and political instances.

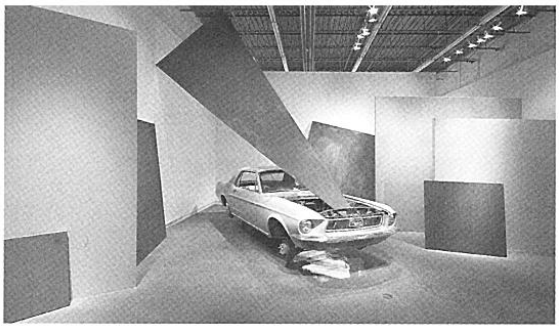
"Today a Legend Died," stems from a remark made by Liddington's father on December 6th, 1988, the day American music legend Roy Orbison died of a heart attack. Although Liddington was only eight years old at the time, his father's lament—an affective and definitive response to a shifting paradigm—resonated with him, and continues to resonate within this particular exhibition's amalgamation of both personal and universal narratives.

With its rich history full of hopefulness, loss and class struggle, the Mustang sports car is the central symbol of revolution within the exhibition. The idea of incorporating the car came to the artist in a dream, inspired by his childhood growing up in a middle-class community in Mississauga, Ontario, which is where Liddington inherited his interest in cars from his father. The exhibition is thus rooted in nostalgia, and underscores the optimism of the "everyman's dream," as well as a paternal bond formed around the objectification of automotives found in suburban life.

Presented within the gallery space, the car embodies the wist of this dream and its impossibility: the coupe reads as an aged relic while still invoking the car collector's ideal. It is also important to note here that this exhibition is located within a bourgeois site: a commercial gallery space that replaces a recently converted industrial garage. Within this space, the car collector and the everyman unite in their evaluation of objecthood, and in turn, the icon of the car's economic, social and political relationships.

The car is also the site of the exhibition's three-part performance: *Act I: Today a Legend Died (for the workers); Act II: Today a Legend Died (by the workers);* and *Act III: Viva La Revolution*. Borrowing the three-act structure from theatre, each performance drew upon Liddington's narrative of nostalgia, violence and revolution.

In the first piece, a militaristic dancer (Cara Spooner) shifts the traditionally feminine practice of balleristic pirouetting to one that relies on tension, balance and exhaustion. As her endurance unravels, so too does the strength of her counterpart, Derek Kwan, as his immense efforts to lift the automobile only evidence a subtle shifting of the huge geometric form that vertically penetrates the car's hood. As he lifts, Kwan sings an operatic rendition of Orbison's famous ballad "Only the Lonely," translated in German, which enlivens the space and emphasizes proletarian narratives that are taken up with the performative characters, the space's industrial staging and its accompanying minimalist drawings.



Derek Liddington, *Today a Legend Died. Viva La Revolution.*
Installation view at Daniel Faria Gallery, 2012.
PHOTO: JENNIFER SCIARRINO; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST / DANIEL FARIA GALLERY

By the workers is another two-person reenactment using both ballet and song as disseminating tactics. While restaging the historic avant-garde dance made popular by Trisha Brown in 1970, *Leaning Duets*, dancer Rui Amaral experiments with the idea of reliance as he grasps his way around the car using only the grip of his sweating fingertips to maintain his balance and secure his movement around the vehicle. This occurs in counterpoint to the musical reinterpretation of the French National anthem, "La Marseillaise," as performed on electric guitar by Jesse Bellon. Addressing popular stereotypes of proletariats, civilians and radicals, these two performances challenge formal, social and cultural ideologies, while positing their respective historical referents as revolutionary tropes.

The final act, *Viva La Revolution*, consisted of the artist and his father collaboratively rebuilding the family's iconic '68 Mustang engine within the main gallery space over the course of a week—allowing viewers to engage with the act of collaboration, assembly and restoration. An appropriate end to such a personally loaded show, the familial relationship between Liddington and his father becomes performative within the space of the white cube—especially since, in this case, the space formerly operated as an autobody shop and garage. Using labour to investigate transformation, the dichotomous display between father and son invokes other binaries (teacher and student; artist and non-artist) and works to reveal moments of tension before the revolution, or, before the renewal of the vehicle's function and meaning.

The exhibition, of course, is only half named for Liddington's father's sentiments. "Viva La Revolution" stems from Liddington's time spent in Rome in 2004, which coincided with the Palestinian politician Yasser Arafat's death from unknown complications. The artist describes his exposure to the overwhelming pedestrian soundtrack of the iconic phrase "Long live the revolution!," a phrase that also found meaning in the 1968 mass student occupations that took place in Paris, France, which is, interestingly, the same year Ford's Mustang coupe model was introduced to the public. Liddington's coincidental presence within a foreign, energetic social protest lent new and personal meaning to a declaration with such deep historical origins and universal relevance, as evident in both the exhibition's personal and popular references.

In addition to mining his own personal and familial experience, Liddington also engages the meditations of his art-historical ancestors. A series of drawings displayed in the back gallery are influenced by radical figures such as Hugo Ball, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Frank Stella. Formally, these complex geometric drawings celebrate every mark of the artist's hand while exposing the violence of their rubbing, repetition and erasing. Liddington here seeks to reimagine both conceptual and political moments of violence throughout history. Violence here is referenced using conceptual moments of trauma, tragedy and uprising, such as John Lennon's murder, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the split of the Sex Pistols, and the Los Angeles race riots, where incongruent actions find visual relevance as points in an arc of cultural and personal histories. For example, the large, semi-circular graphite study on the west gallery wall is, as per the subtitle of the work, "a repeated wedge visualizing the passage of time during the years following Roy Orbison's death and preceding the suicide of Kurt Cobain." These drawings illustrate the romanticization of revolt as their immense layering echoes the complicated and interwoven nature of their social, political and personal content.

Whether Liddington's viewers are fortunate enough to engage with the exhibition in all its forms, it is clear that this body of work posits tropes of revolution in an effort to incite our own reflection of what this term actually means. Liddington employs reiteration, performance and autobiography to reify this understanding, leaving us to put the pieces together. ×

Ellyn Walker is a Toronto-based writer and artist.