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Derek Liddington's fender blender

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Derek Liddington at the Daniel Faria Gallery Until May 26, 188 St. Helen's Ave., Toronto; danielfariagallery.com

You walk into a pristinely redecorated former industrial space. The walls are chalk white, the floors smooth as slate, the lighting precise and a bit chilly. So far, so typical. It's an art gallery, the Daniel Faria, centrepiece of Toronto's latest gallery district, just west of Bloor and Lansdowne.

But this month, if you stare straight ahead, past the clean front desk, you'll see a gutted, dirty old car – a curvy car that Steve McQueen might have driven, parked in the middle of the gallery floor. Or, to be more precise, jacked up; the wheels are gone. Surrounding the car are a series of propped-up, tipsy canvases, painted in brushed-steel colours. Some are large as a wading pool; some, small as a coffee table. One enormous canvas, shaped like a pizza slice, is sticking out the roof of the broken-down car.

For a half-second you consider, then instantly (but reluctantly) reject the wonderful, smash-grab fun idea that some insane artist has driven a car straight through the crisp gallery walls and knocked over all the art. One can hope, no?

In fact, Derek Liddington's multipart installation – heartily entitled Today A Legend Died. Viva La Revolution – is all that I just described and then a rusty bucket's worth more of art theory, art history, autobiography, and layer upon layer of footnotable sociocultural references.

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The first half of the title, for instance, is a quote from the artist's father, spoken on the day Roy Orbison died in 1988. The second half is poached from any number of revolutions (perhaps the 1968 Paris riots; the car just happens to be a'68 Mustang). And the '68 'Stang is, in car-culture terms, an automobile loaded with its own cultural and sexual history.

And that spearing, pointed canvas? That's a reference to Soviet constructivist art and theatre-set decorating (a reference more fully explored, and exploited, in a recent performance at the gallery that involved an opera singer and a ballet dancer, both dressed in costumes poached from an early modernist theatre work).

As for the gravity-challenged canvases, they are covered in graphite dust that Liddington applied by hand – dust that, naturally, has more than one meaning (dust never sleeps). It references a series of dense, repetitive graphite drawings by Liddington on display in the gallery's back room – drawings that themselves are inspired by timelines running between various pivotal cultural events (such as the years between the death of Roy Orbison and Kurt Cobain).

If that's not enough annotation for you, the chipper gallerists at Daniel Faria will be happy to spend a leisurely half-hour unpacking the rest of Liddington's maniacal cross-referencing (that is, if there is a finite amount of intra-art tag-you're-it going on here: if Liddington hasn't rigged the show to eat its own tail, to feed back endlessly on its own referentiality).

Or, you could skip all the above information and start with a simple "Wow!" Wow, there's a busted car in the gallery! Wow, there's a gigantic painting piercing the hood!

From these primal reactions, it would not be untoward of the viewer to further consider this exhibition's obvious (happily so) "guy art" connotations – broken-down cars on blocks, tossed around, as if by the Hulk; colossal canvases; the manly grey-on-gunmetal colour scheme.

From May 22 to 26, Liddington and his father will be camped out in the gallery, attempting to rebuild the shattered car. Talk about male bonding. I could barely stand a three-minute car ride with my late

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father – he would never let me choose the radio station. So you'll pardon me if I read a distinctly melancholy tone underneath Liddington's art-historical musings and muscle-car porn fantasies. There is a longing in this show, a longing for an era, imagined or not, when a simpler form of maleness was available to North American men, a maleness based on an assumption of shared values, appreciations, and interests passed from fathers to sons – the legendary "guy code."

Liddington's didactics describe this longing in terms of class, positioning the 1968 Mustang as a working man's aspirational totem, its slick design and ready speed as stand-ins for covetable economic status and (at least horse) power. But I can't help seeing in this exhibition a marked nostalgia for a less complex time, the premetrosexual era, flawed and exclusionary as it was.

I don't note this as a criticism – Liddington is hardly the first artist to look fondly back on the rigid world of male socioeconomic domination while well aware of its too-high costs. There's a popular cable-television show making millions off this same widespread sense of masculine displacement.