



DEREK SULLIVAN:
THE MISSING NOVELLA

THE HOUSE OF FICTION HAS MANY ROOMS

JON DAVIES

“In his lecture series ‘The Neutral’ [...] Roland Barthes tells his auditors that all of his references and citations will come from the books contained in the library of his country house. This self-imposed limitation is in fact a freedom to construct one’s work, one’s world, with what is close at hand and close to the heart, with what is on the shelves, read, reread, unread ... ”
—Moyra Davey

A privileged relationship exists between reading and domestic spaces. Both offer a certain degree of privacy and the promise of interiority. Houses hide their stories behind often genteel facades, as books hide their stories between covers.

In novels and short stories, particularly in the British literary tradition, the country house or estate is a setting boasting great dramatic potential. The classes mix there, servants and served surreptitiously intermingle for romance, intrigue, murder. At a remove from urban life and nosy neighbours, forbidden affairs are kindled, families are torn apart by long-repressed secrets, and someone might even end up dead. As author Blake Morrison noted in the *Guardian* in 2011, “The house of fiction has many rooms, but country house fiction has more rooms than most.”

Toronto-based artist Derek Sullivan’s exhibition at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, *The Missing Novella*, begins with the absent book of its title and the country house’s close ties to masquerade, deception and artifice. (As the artist noted, “It makes perfect sense why we turn these houses into art galleries.”) Perhaps the missing novella was authored by Kazuo Ishiguro, Henry James or Evelyn Waugh, just a handful of the authors who have mined the country house as a site of drama. Sullivan’s own pantheon of iconic country houses includes Howard’s End (from E.M. Forster’s eponymous novel), Belle Ombre (Tom Ripley’s home in Patricia Highsmith’s *Riplied*) and Two Acres (from Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*).

Gazing at the drawn and sculptural traces that Sullivan has left in and around the former private estate house of Gairloch Gardens, we are led to imagine the themes of this enigmatic and lost volume. What conflicts and intrigue have taken place here: familial strife, illicit liaisons, battles over property and title, kidnapping, assault? The story’s contours recede into the ether, eluding our grasp.



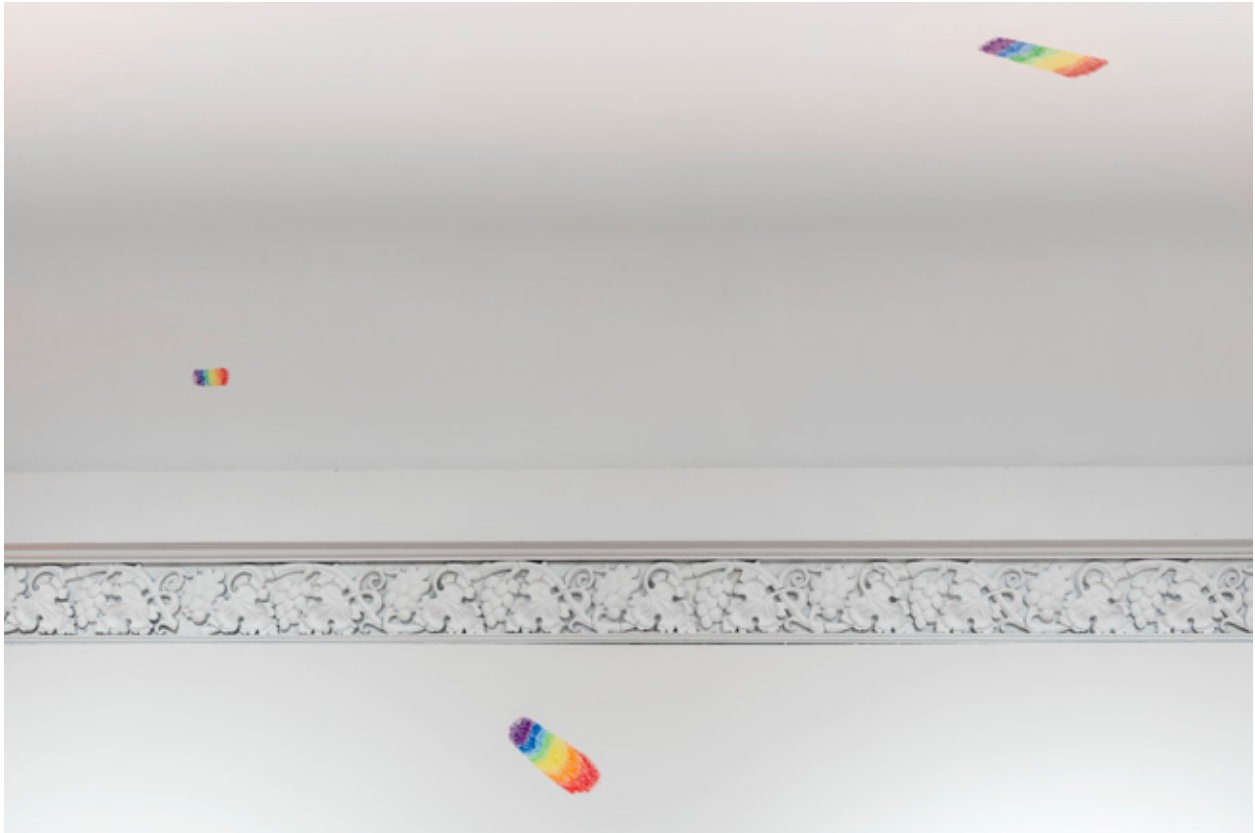
Sullivan's practice draws on legacies of modernist art and design, conceptualism and the history of the artist's book, reworking these traditions with a mercurial wit and the use of contemporary technologies and concepts. The book is a central focus of Sullivan's practice, and a highly mutable and flexible form. He is always pushing the limits of what a book can be and do. In Sullivan's hands it can become not just a repository for the written word or a sculptural object, but a space or even a performance. In his large-scale commissioned exhibition at The Power Plant in Toronto in 2011, *Albatross Omnibus*, Sullivan printed editions of fifty-two identically sized artist's books, each of which hung from the ceiling by airplane cable so they could only be accessed if visitors were willing (and able!) to climb one of the movable ladders present. (The ladders thus became akin to stages for performing acts of reading.) This installation was connected to the adjacent gallery by an accordion-shaped wall that mirrored that of the snaking foldout inside the exhibition catalogue. The wall became the page and vice-versa: both provided supports for "hanging" Sullivan's drawings.

Derek Sullivan, installation view of *Albatross Omnibus*, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, 24 September – 20 November 2011. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Like the fifty-two *Albatross Omnibus* books, Sullivan's ongoing Poster Drawings are uniformly sized. This series consists of primarily abstract portrait-oriented rectangles of pencil crayon marks that occasionally flirt with figuration in their compositions. They are also customizable, typically exhibited in fluidly curated constellations of multiple drawings and mounted on painted, postered or wallpapered surfaces in order to multiply the visual field further. Additionally, their titles change over time, with prior nomenclature struck out and new titles appearing. In this way the drawings become perpetual idea- and language-generating machines. Similarly, Sullivan has authored publications that exist primarily in digital form, which allows them to be in a constant state of revision and flux, so the same "book" might be markedly different if printed in 2011 versus in 2014. This practice exaggerates the often overlooked but stark variations in the printing and dissemination of books.

Derek Sullivan, installation view of *Albatross Omnibus*, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, 24 September – 20 November 2011. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Sullivan has recently expanded his drawing practice to encompass drawing in pencil crayon directly on the wall. In his first wall drawing, *Problems That Arise from Continually Confusing Left & Right*, commissioned by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston in 2014, Sullivan drew a large-scale articulated line resembling a folding ruler with ten joints. Purchased for the institution's collection, the wall drawing's shape and configuration—when redrawn in the future—are open to interpretation as long as the number of joints and overall length of the line remained consistent. Sullivan's practice includes many such confrontations between established rules—which resemble the instruction-based processes endemic to 1960s conceptual art—and a certain freedom or entropy. For *A Piece of Glass*, his site-specific work created at Oakville Galleries for the summer 2015 group drawing exhibition *Out of Line*, which continues to be on display for *The Missing Novella*, Sullivan was inspired by the optical effect created when a prism is hung in the sun.¹ The light refracts, casting a rainbow spectrum of colour on the surfaces of the room. Here Sullivan magnifies and stylizes these effects as he draws dozens of rainbows on the walls and ceiling; he then hangs a prism in the window, which contributes its own dazzling visual effects to the gallery.

Derek Sullivan, *A Piece of Glass*, 2015. Coloured pencil on painted wall. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

In the nearby Salah Bachir Room, a beautifully crafted wooden bookcase full of paperbacks—shrouded in ghostly white paper to render them anonymous—has been toppled to the ground, though whether the cause of the disruption was a heated domestic disturbance or a seismological tremor is unclear. Down the hall in the Central Gallery, the north wall is adorned with *Peg Rail #9 (The Bog People)*. A morbid assemblage of objects hangs from the pegs, including thick rope, a heavy wrench and a dirty shovel that was used to dig a shallow grave hidden in the Gardens outside. Here a hint of a murder-mystery narrative bleeds from the house into the verdant beyond: a highly manicured, well-frequented public park.

Throughout the exhibition galleries, Sullivan has installed a selection of Poster Drawings that “reconsider” his use of fields of grey to create, to varying degrees, a mirror-like effect. His new drawings explicitly reference mirrors—including a baroque, eagle-topped example with a distorting lens by influential Belgian conceptual artist and mischief-maker Marcel Broodthaers (#107, *mb makes me look fat*)—though the texture of the pencil crayon marks mean the drawings fail at reflecting our likenesses. Another new Poster Drawing, #105, *Continuity in Space*, reproduces a postcard of Italian Futurist Giacomo Balla’s 1912 painting *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, tucked into the edge. Sullivan has also created a new wall drawing of an ornate mirror, as if furnishing the walls of the home with his own hand, adding illusory decor one pencil crayon mark at a time. Much as the mirror drawings cannot reflect our images back to us, other correspondences and potential points of communion in the house are similarly impeded, refracted or diffused like the light from the prism.



Above (left to right): Derek Sullivan, #96, *Four things happening at the same time*, 2013. Coloured pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist; Derek Sullivan, #107, *mb makes me look fat*, 2015. Coloured pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tatjana Pieters, Ghent; Derek Sullivan, #88, *Like the kids do, Between here and there*, 2012. Coloured pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Photos: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Overleaf: Derek Sullivan, #105, *Continuity in Space*, 2015. Coloured pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist.



Whatever may have once taken place in this house is unknowable to us in the present. The cozy North Gallery, with its central fireplace, hosts installations of furniture sculptures off-set by drawn replicas of books and found sculptures and everyday objects. One Gerrit Rietveld-style Zig-Zag chair holds stacked biographies that form a daisy chain of authors and subjects, while another props up the sunnily titled *Hello Is Other People*. Nearby a coffee table modeled on artist Henry Moore's from his home, Hoglands, is graced with a sleek bar set—fuel to fire the home's tensions—and is otherwise precariously crowded with assembled sculptural forms.

Throughout Sullivan's practice, modernist forms that have traditionally evoked a quest for purity of expression or purpose instead bear marks of the used, the handmade or the messily personal. Sullivan's works incorporating furniture, for example, stage a tension between the functionality of objects and the idiosyncratic uses that people find for them in the slow unfolding of their day-to-day domestic lives. The book here embodies this tension between a standardized form and the potentially limitless possibilities of what it could contain, the rigidity of a rectangle charged with all the mayhem and intrigue that a literary imagination could conjure up. The protagonists of this drama—their hopes and fears, joys and sorrows—are noticeably absent. They appear only in an unsigned novella that exerts its influence despite being missing—whether stolen, out of print or perpetually beyond our reach.

ESSAY NOTES

¹On receiving Sullivan's proposal I immediately thought of the memorable scene in Mike Leigh's 2014 film *Mr. Turner* where nineteenth-century Scottish scientist Mary Somerville demonstrates the prism to the British painter, throwing "wee particles into chaos" in her experiments with the magnetic properties of violet light.

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Cover: Derek Sullivan, #107, *mb makes me look fat*, 2015. Coloured pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tatjana Pieters, Ghent.

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