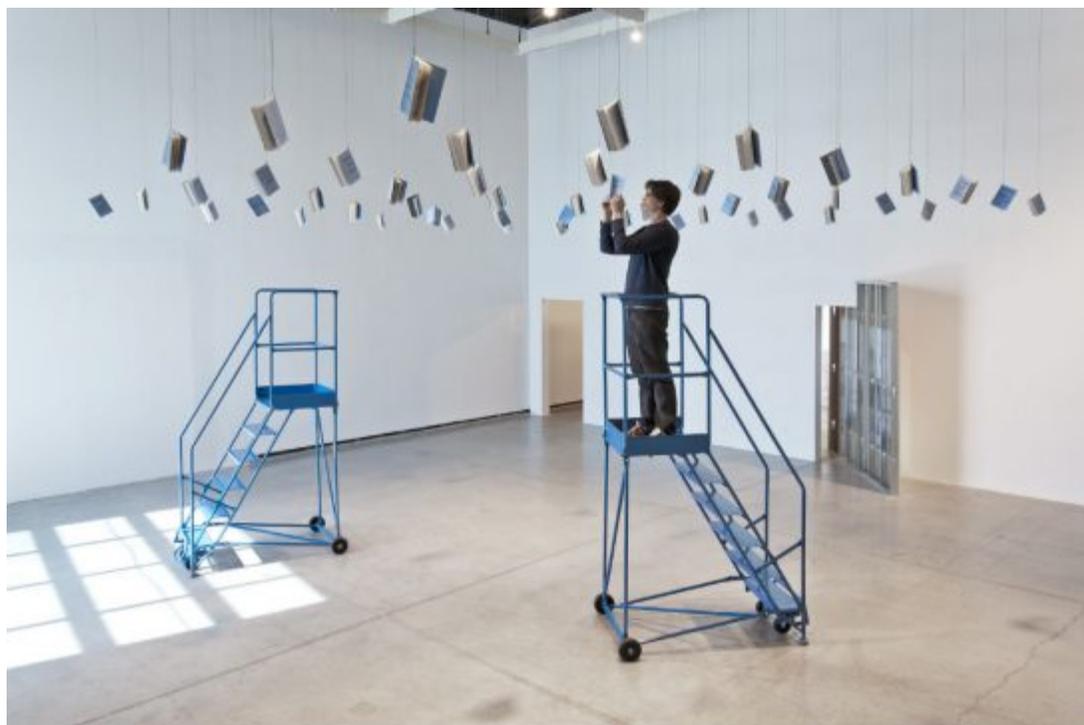


Above the ground, down to earth

Derek Sullivan's heady work roots itself to physical experience in his current Power Plant show.



Toni Hafkenscheid photo

A viewer at the Power Plant leafs through one of the 52 bookworks by Toronto artist Derek Sullivan, which he has set to dangle above the gallery floor as part of his installation "Albatross Omnibus."

By: Murray Whyte

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I have absolutely no idea what the title of Derek Sullivan's current Power Plant show is supposed to mean, so I'm not even going to tell you what it is (all right, fine, it's *Albatross Omnibus*. Happy?)

The thing is, I'm not sure it makes any difference. Sullivan's reductive, constructive, subtly wry practice is so intricate, enigmatic and elusive that it's easy to get lost in the triple-talk that can shroud the work itself and insulate the viewer from actually experiencing it.

That would be a shame, because Sullivan, in his exploration of the big "isms" of 20th century art — minimalism and conceptualism in particular — crafts finely wrought works, even though they're made largely to service the greater context he sets out for himself.

At the Power Plant, Sullivan busts out of the intellectual realm he typically inhabits and gamely into full-fledged physical space. Sullivan's rupture of the gallery itself is a quirkily seductive — if overtly hammy — amusement.

Entering *Albatross* (I just had to say that), a bare metal stud wall zigzags through the middle of the square gallery space, at one point poking through into the gallery beyond.

One side of Sullivan's jagged architectural intervention is lined with gallery-standard crisp, white drywall, where a couple dozen of his poster works are hung with typical art-gallery precision. These include line drawings evocative of the work of such minimalist icons as Sol LeWitt, as well as collage and text works: Sullivan padding out his conceptual quasi-homage (early conceptualists like Lawrence Weiner were fond of the textual non-sequitur, hence, at least I think, *Albatross Omnibus*).

On the other side, the bare metal studs frame the brown-paper backing of the drywall. Pasted to it is a grainy newsprint photo of a bookish young woman — goggle-like glasses, bowl cut, need I go on? — flipping through a slim volume. The image repeats itself in the dozens, though not identically.

It's a clear nod to the 1960s minimalist impulse to critique the art economy of its day, with works made from prosaic materials and in multiples, the better to challenge the notion of the single, precious authoritative work of art.

With his jagged intervention, Sullivan carves up gallery convention — right angles, white walls — and pulls back the veil, so to speak, breaking the illusion and giving the audience equal access to the artwork (his drawings) and the structure that supports them.

It says on the wall that the zigzag is meant to represent the unfolding of a book, and true to its intention as it may be, it seems sort of secondary to its more potent, subversive function. It's a decent — if somewhat heavy-handed — segue into the next room, where 52 of Sullivan's book works dangle well out of reach from wires on the ceiling.

This is the fun part. Three movable industrial ladders serve as on-ramps to Sullivan's bookworks, themselves an homage to the history of do-it-yourself culture in their roughly made, photocopy-and-staple style.

Individually, they're clever; one called *Trees of Canada* substitutes images of cocktails for trees; another, called *Burying Small Fires* is a practical, step-by-step photographic guide to, well, burying small fires.

Taken together, though, Sullivan is following on the tradition of his conceptual forebears, fiddling with the definition of art itself: high versus low — don't think for a moment the above-it-all installation of Sullivan's humbly made books is a random indulgence — and singular versus mass-produced.

It's a well-travelled road, to say the least, and one upon which I'm not sure Sullivan leaves much of a mark. That said, outside the work's conceptual snarl, Sullivan's physical impositions on both the gallery and the viewers themselves make for an engaging, confounding experience. Sullivan's practice may be a heady one, but *Albatross Omnibus* helps bring it down to earth.

Derek Sullivan, *Albatross Omnibus*, continues at the Power Plant until Nov. 6. See www.thepowerplant.org