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Derek Sullivan: Young Americans: Installation views at KIOSK, 2011. Images courtesy the artist and Galerie Tatjana Pieters, Ghent. All photos: Yana Foque

Bookish in Belgium: Derek Sullivan’s friendly and formal “Young Americans”

by Jen Hutton

2011 has already been a busy year for Toronto-based artist Derek Sullivan. On the heels of exhibitions in Toronto, Ottawa, Waterloo and New York, Sullivan continues to pursue an ongoing project with New York-based artist Gareth Long and just received his second longlist nod for the Sobey Award. Sullivan is currently preparing for his commissioned exhibition Albatross Omnibus at The Power Plant this fall. This past spring, Sullivan, who is represented by Jessica Bradley Art +Projects in Toronto, took a break to speak with artist and writer Jen Hutton about his recent solo exhibition at KIOSK, an up-and-coming contemporary exhibition space in Ghent, Belgium.



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Jen Hutton (JH): How did your show at KIOSK come about?

Derek Sullivan (DS): The show came about after the curator at KIOSK, Wim Waelput, became interested in my work after a solo exhibition I had with Tatjana Pieters, a Ghent-based commercial gallerist, in 2008. Wim had been programming exhibitions in a pavilion connected to the KASK, the art school in Ghent. By the time we started talking about a show, that little pavillion had been decommissioned because the gallery had taken its permanent space inside the school. The KASK is a part of a cultural complex that the city was developing in a group of old building that has been, over the years, a monastery and a hospital. The gallery is in a 19th Century neo-gothic portion of the building that was the surgical theatre for training doctors. The gallery is built around this theatre, with a number of smaller rooms radiating from it. So, it's quite an eccentric space. KIOSK has only been programming there for one year, so they haven't developed any tried and true rules for how shows should happen, which is kind of nice actually. The various spaces in their portion of the complex are used differently for each exhibition.

JH: So, it's kind of a malleable exhibition space.

DS: It's very malleable. Although KIOSK has programmed solo exhibitions that take over the whole space, Wim seems to prefer programming two parallel solo exhibitions at the same time. I was paired with Jan de Cock, who is known for doing these large, very ambitious projects. How our two exhibitions would work together was the least-resolved aspect of this project before installation began but, in the end, it worked together really well.

JH: Stemming from that idea of a happy accident, it sounds as if the inner architecture of KIOSK's space could be navigated or read like a book, like many of

your previous projects.

DS: The architecture is comprised of a stacked series of rooms, which related to my strategy of stacking objects and materials formally, somewhat akin to a manuscript where you have to unpeel it one page at a time. It's about an experience or delivery that is a bit slower. I wanted the show to be based on a conceit that the exhibition *Young Americans* was a book. Actually, the exhibition started with the title *Young Americans*, which I know is counter to how many artists work. But, I used the title as a framing device for collecting certain materials within it. The literal touchstone for the title was a pair of books that the Museum of Modern Art published in the 1950s that I bought in a dollar bin. One was called *12 Americans* and the other *16 Americans*, which were primarily surveys of American art at the time. They were very formalized in a way, in that the editors accompanied reproductions of the work with stylized, staged portraits of each artist—the kind of thing you might see on the back of a book jacket. In the first book, there were portraits of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—it was their first institutional show—and they looked *young*. To me, there's something amazing about these books in that they capture the potential that these portraits have, combined with two or three images of work that are the seed or the kernel of a practice that we now know.



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JH: So, are you reading their work through this biographical filter?

DH: Only on a superficial level. I became fascinated with these portraits, in the sense that rather than seeing a work as a footnote for a period, you actually saw the faces of the people who made them. In truth, even though I had used the MoMA catalogues as a starting point, I also broke the rules a little bit. There's an image of Philip Johnson from the 1930s, and one of Montgomery Clift from the 50s. I'll admit I'm being a little loose with the term, but I'm wholly interested in the idea of the relatively young American artist, and also the position of youth in cultural production. I'm not trying to revisit or unearth a history, but I'm using it to reflect on the present. On one level, I was thinking about how, as a young artist, you might only get a couple of chances: you throw your work up against the wall, and if it

doesn't stick, then that's it.

And so, *Young Americans* became the title for an exhibition that was designed as a book, which is a way that one can formalize a set of ideas or information in a moment and allows us to then reflect on them later on. But, the exhibition is a temporal thing. Although the show contains about 14 framed drawings, they are hung on the walls on top of large black and white Xeroxed pages that in their form imply that they are pulled from the pages of a book. The prints have page numbers though not all of them are present.

JH: Looking at the documentation of the show, on some of these pages you've used this placeholder for an image—this rectangle or bounding box with an 'x' through it—almost as a formal device.

DS: Some of the pages have photographs culled from those books that I mentioned, while others have a bounding box as a placeholder ready to receive an image, which in my mind implies that the book is a draft, or in flux. These prints were hung in long horizontals around the various spaces that I was exhibiting in, and the framed drawings were hung on top, creating these two simultaneous rhythms through the space. I'd like to think of them as two trajectories slightly out of sync, so at some points the drawings would obscure what was behind them. But ultimately, you only experience this book within the space at KIOSK.



JH: That's a concept that comes up frequently in your other projects, too—where you posit that a book is a malleable, indefinite thing. This is a relatively old concept—from when early books were ripped apart and bound in anthologies for circulation,

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to more contemporary ideas around print-on-demand publishing.

DS: Yes, as a print-on-demand author you are able to constantly alter the file because each book is being printed one-at-a-time. Each time the book is printed, it has the capacity to become a unique iteration. So, in this sense, the book becomes a malleable framing device that allows one to float or consider a set of ideas.

JH: But, that runs counter to what we think books are: how they archive information; how they become these static, singular repositories for data.

DS: Well, they still do, but they are about freezing something that is already in flux. In terms of the artist books that I make, indeed there is no definitive version because the parameters of the book are more speculative. So, it's not about fixing an argument or form in time, but rather making manifest a kind of changing trajectory of thought. A book is fixed, but to experience it you have to read it, which is in itself an act of interpretation and not a fixed thing. These fluctuations of meaning and the shifting of meaning is something I'm very interested in. The *Poster Drawings* are comprised of these reduced, abstract forms so they have the capacity to be about anything.

JH: Like a screen.

DS: Yes, a screen, or a platform to receive information. And, it's sensitive to context continually. In terms of the show at KIOSK, I showed four works from the *Poster Drawings* series, and in a way they became strangely affected by the structure of *Young Americans*. One in particular was based on this very strange, Op-Art inspired album cover from the late-60s, and it was from that juxtaposition that I began to think about popular music during that time in the context of the show.

JH: Do you feel this show could be easily shown in North America or do you think it has a certain appeal to a European audience?

DS: Well, that's part of it, as well. Initially, I liked the idea of it as I, too, am a young, American artist—although technically a North American artist—and I thought of the show as a way to frame the foreignness of my point of view. I was making an exhibition at a place where I had already exhibited, so my work wasn't without context. But, it was foreign. So, it was a nice starting point for me to keep that foreignness in mind. We constantly recall the forms and exchanges in abstraction during the early part of the 20th Century between Europe and North America, but what is actually the residue or reputation of that history? I don't think we really look that well at art anymore but rather see art as a floating sea of signs. I use these strategies to tease out various signs to create a semblance of a subject, but that subject is always in flux. Dada is a loaded word, but it's essentially a collage strategy that I'm using. Especially in its early incarnations, such as with Schwitters, collage was primarily a formal enterprise based on abstraction. Understanding the work is based on its composition, though there's always this residue of where the fragments came from—newspapers, books and so on. The show at KIOSK came together in that way, having a group of images, my own reading experience and then bringing that together with a few other trajectories, such as a drawing practice, and setting it up in a context that is foreign to me. Friendly, but foreign. And, the titling for the drawings would occur after the fact. It's not being indefinite; I'm very definitive about the fact that ideas change. It's about being open to the fact that these things are going to be refined and projected on.



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JH: Or, accrue meaning over time.

DS: Exactly. It's like a snowball. But, at the same time, I know I do it in a very subtle way. These changes are quite slight. There are enough practices out there devoted to accruing material, like Dieter Roth's works or Jason Rhoades' installations. There are the ways that those things can literally happen, but for me I

feel that the things that I'm using as mechanisms in my work are actually present in all work, though we choose not to see them.

JH: Why is that? Is it a strategy of preservation that we don't see the changing core of art?

DS: I think that when an artist puts a work in circulation it is meant to be definitive. If that work becomes contaminated through other contexts, then somehow it's outside of the work. We know that a work is different in the studio than it is in the museum. There have been enough discussions about the role of the studio and the museum in contemporary art practice before and after Daniel Buren formalized it. We allow the work to be read under the authorship of a collector. But, what happens when, for example, a museum installs a Rothko next to a Brice Marden? Aren't they affecting each other? Shouldn't the fact that a certain work that is in storage for a decade should be taken in account? Especially now with the formalization of curatorial practice, the work does reflect the authorship of the curator, as well. The work is physically unchanged, but that exhibition history should be considered a material part of the work; so that in the *Poster Drawings*, the titles grow on them in such a way to acknowledge changes. I know at times the titles can be opaque, but the fact is the real histories of art are opaque. The titles are not meant to be explicative but rather indexes for past contexts that we can't always access.

JH: Earlier you mentioned thinking about popular music, which is funny because I wanted to ask whether there was a relationship between David Bowie's stab at 60s soul with his album *Young Americans*—or the title track—and this show?

DS: No, not at all.

JH: Well, is it a latent reference?

DS: I want it to be a *false friend*, which is this idea that manifests in translations between languages. It's a word that sounds so familiar to your own language that it must have the same semantic meaning, but often it can mean the opposite. I wanted to have an ambivalent take on what *Young Americans* was. I'm interested in evoking those latent references, but it wasn't about Bowie, specifically.

Derek Sullivan's Young Americans was exhibited at KIOSK from April 23 to June 12, 2011. His Albatross Omnibus opens at the Power Plant on September 24, 2011.

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