

# Hidden in plain sight

Artist Derek Sullivan contemplates Shift, a sculpture by the famed Richard Serra, left neglected and exposed to the elements in Ontario's countryside

by Kate Taylor, The Globe and Mail, 16 May 2025



Derek Sullivan stands by Shift, a concrete sculpture by renowned American artist Richard Serra, located in a field in King City, Ont. Sullivan has been visiting the hidden piece since 2021, producing a series of drawings inspired by his research of the work.  
Sammy Kogan/The Globe and Mail

Ontario artist Derek Sullivan has no special affection for the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s and 1970s, with its unadorned surfaces and abstract geometries. And he detects some hubris in the American land art movement of the period, which inserted modernism right into the earth, producing such renowned installations as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Donald Judd's desert sculptures at Marfa, Texas, and Richard Serra's monumental site-specific works.

"I'm not actually a huge fan of Serra; the grandness is not how I like to work: I prefer scrappy pencil drawings," Sullivan said.

And yet here he is, on a spring morning, standing in a fallow field about 50 kilometres north of Toronto, contemplating what is probably the most celebrated but least seen example of Serra's land art. *Shift*, a series of six low concrete walls following the line of the rolling moraine, was erected in 1972 on private farmland owned by the Toronto developer and art collector Roger Davidson. He had invited Serra to build on his country property in King City, Ont., and the American artist came to Canada accompanied by his then-partner and collaborator, artist Joan Jonas, to build *Shift*.

Serra, who died in 2024, was one of America's most important modernist sculptors and *Shift* is considered a seminal work from his early career: Sullivan was introduced to photographs of the piece as an art student at York University. Yet it is also little known and seldom seen because no one is really responsible for it. While other land art pieces are carefully preserved by art foundations or museums, *Shift* has been left to the elements, partly overgrown with grasses and dogwood, and occasionally dinged by a farmer's passing tractor.



Sullivan walks alongside Shift. Sammy Kogan/The Globe and Mail

“What I like about the Serra is its roughness, the fact that it's cracked, that it's scraped, that it's been allowed to age with the space. It's not maintained as a precious thing that has to be intact,” Sullivan said. “I call this one a feral artwork. No one cares for it.”

It's the relationship between the art and its changing site that really interests Sullivan, who has created a body of work about the sculpture and its unlikely setting now showing at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in nearby Kleinburg. His project extends his interest in the context in which art is made and seen: A previous piece reimaged a tall column sculpture by the Romanian modernist Constantin Brancusi, which suggested infinite height as a Toronto telephone pole covered in flyers with the potential for infinite girth. He is always interested in how art is distributed and has printed many of his own artist's books.

Davidson, who died in 2005, sold his property a few years after *Shift* was erected and it now stands on land that belongs to Great Gulf, the builder of several local subdivisions. It's all private property, but local



dog walkers and dirt bikers use the forest that leads to the field, and someone recently built a bonfire up against *Shift*. Meanwhile, a local farmer rotates crops, including wheat and soybean, in the field.



The sculpture is flanked by vegetation. Sammy Kogan/The Globe and Mail

Great Gulf has no plans to build on the site because it is a protected cultural landscape under the Ontario Heritage Act, said Kathleen Schofield, the developer's president of low-rise residential. And the surrounding land is part of the protected Oak Ridges Moraine. "The site will remain as is for the foreseeable future," she said in a statement provided to The Globe.

When Sullivan first decided to investigate in 2021, he wasn't sure he would be able to reach *Shift*, thinking he would find it surrounded by subdivisions. He grew up in suburban Richmond Hill, Ont., and figured his work based on *Shift* would be about encroaching suburbia or blocked access to the site. Using wayfinding skills he perfected playing video games as a boy, he found the right path and emerged from the forest on a hot July day. Foliage eclipsed any sign of nearby housing while a flock of herons sat in a row on one of *Shift*'s handy walls. It was nature not development that was in charge.

His pencil and mixed media drawings, entitled *Field Notes*, reflect that, with images of the herons and of his own shadow looming over the ground as he photographs the site or bends down to pick up stones. Illustrative and narrative, they are far removed from grand minimalist sculpture.

"I find it eye-watering the resources that go into that kind of work, for the vision of a singular person. I often respond more strongly to the poetics of a scrappy piece of material. Or that an idea in an artist's book can be equally profound and grand and huge. The sense of mass and scale is only achieved by actually making it that mass," he said, referring to *Shift*. "So, I recognize that it does need to be this way, but it's the antithesis of how I would want to work."

Sullivan's work is moving on now; he teaches at Toronto's Ontario College of Art & Design University and works out of a weekend studio east of the city, near Tamworth, Ont., where he is cutting out the modernist middleman and erecting his own dry-stone wall.



Sammy Kogan/The Globe and Mail

Meanwhile, the future of *Shift* remains foggy. Municipal preservation efforts in the early 2000s did lead to designating the field a protected cultural landscape but in 2010-12 the Art Gallery of Ontario abandoned discussions about acquiring *Shift* when it became clear there wouldn't be public access. Sullivan, who is cautious about revealing the field's exact location, thinks that if it were turned into a public park Serra's walls would soon be targeted with graffiti. Today *Shift* is famous yet hidden, safe in its state of neglect.

*Derek Sullivan: Field Notes continues at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., until June 29.*