

View of Geoffrey Farmer's exhibition "Let's Make the Water Turn Black," 2011; at REDCAT.



## LOS ANGELES GEOFFREY FARMER REDCAT

Geoffrey Farmer's recent exhibition at REDCAT evoked some of the messier, more perverse doings of the 1960s and '70s. The title, "Let's Make the Water Turn Black" (perhaps a reference to excretion or to overusing a bong), was borrowed from a 1968 Frank Zappa song recounting the activities of two boys, Ronnie and Kenny, "whizzing and pasting and poot-ing through the day." The boys' creepy adolescent world, filled with esoteric and unsanitary rituals ("Ronnie keeps his numies [boogers] on a window in his room"), captures the malaise of middle-class, suburban Southern California of the period. Kenny goes on to take pills while Ronnie joins the army; both "long to see a bomber burn."

At REDCAT, as if entering a dream, viewers passed from the sunlit lobby into a darkened space, a world seemingly repressed and veiled from waking life. The gallery was populated with bewildering mechanized assemblages composed mostly of household objects (including many lighting fixtures, recalling the occupation of the song's Daddy Dinky, who "went to work / selling lamps and chairs to San Ber'dino squares"). Arrayed across a large, low platform, they enacted an hour-long nonnarrative script. Assemblages temporarily came to life through lighting, motion and hidden speakers, their "performances" coordinated with an audio collage of found sounds and partial tracks by countercultural icons such as Kathy Acker, John

Cage, Vito Acconci and Allen Ginsberg. Stage lighting temporarily flooded the set with color, isolated sculptural "characters" for "monologues" (though the relationship of word and object was not explicit) or left the viewer in near total darkness. In ritualistic fashion, audience members tended to circumambulate the square stage, adding another kinetic, theatrical layer.

Memorable passages of the audio related incidents of incest or abjection: a woman described an erotic encounter with her father; a man repeatedly called out for mommy, daddy, brother, sister. Meanwhile, a fabric-draped form, sporting a Magritte-like bowler hat and a plastic plant, extended a mechanical arm that hammered a lightbulb on a can; a massive polystyrene replica of Isamu Noguchi's sculpture *To the Issei* (1979) bowed repeatedly. (Noguchi designed the plaza of the nearby Japanese American Cultural Center, where the original sculpture resides.) This reminder of the 1942-45 internment of the Issei, the first generation of Japanese Americans, was one of many allusions to a darker, more complicated regional history than the warm California sun normally brings to mind.

Farmer (b. 1967), who is based in Vancouver and too young to have experienced WWII or the '60s, is known for his research-based, context-specific installations. The "sculpture play" he produced for REDCAT chimes with the Southern California art scene of the 1960s and '70s, in which Bruce Conner's assemblages and the sculptural vignettes of Ed and Nancy Kienholz expressed

social concerns through an esthetics of decay. Farmer's work is also indebted to contemporary instances of hybridized theatrical sculpture such as the Forcefield collective's campy, uncanny tableaux. REDCAT itself, tucked in a corner of Frank Gehry's luminous Walt Disney Concert Hall, must have likewise inspired Farmer to construct a repressed double within a city dominated by the movie industry. "Let's Make the Water Turn Black" performed a kind of archeology of recent Los Angeles cultural history, and the city is more interesting for it.

—Kirsten Swenson

## SANTA MONICA RICHARD T. WALKER CHRISTOPHER GRIMES

A charming absurdity trickles through Richard T. Walker's videos, though what registers most strongly is the work's earnestness, its quiet urgency and the vitality of its questions. Since the mid-2000s, the British-born, San Francisco-based artist has been trying to sort out his relationship with nature, a particularly vexed and lopsided attachment owing to his—or at least his on-screen persona's—wholesale adoption of the pathetic fallacy. In numerous short videos and multichannel installations, Walker appears alone, from behind, confessing his love to the landscape and striving to turn his monologue into a dialogue. Inescapably human in his need to be needed, he pleads for nature to fulfill his expectations: "Please be how, how I desire you," he sings in a 2010 piece. Nature, complete in itself, fails to answer back, return his affections or reassure him.