

## MONTREAL

### Geoffrey Farmer

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

Geoffrey Farmer's video *The Fountain People*, 2008, consists of footage of a fountain located in front of an escalator, most likely in an upscale shopping center. While waiting for some narrative to commence, and perhaps for the titular characters to appear, one must make do with the banal sight of spouting water, the dull glow of lights underwater, and the sedating stream of Muzak. In the accompanying installation, the two typewritten pages affixed to the wall provide little interpretive guidance but allude to strange aquatic forces that covertly watch, surround, and transform in ways analogous to the workings of a pervasive culture industry; according to these texts, the more folks ingest and bathe in this replenishing source, the more powerful "they" (presumably the fountain people) become. Despite its deadpan reductiveness, the work summons a number of associations, perhaps the strongest being to Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and its narrative of a communist conspiracy to fluoridate the bodily fluids of the American people.

A suitable introduction to a mid-career retrospective, organized nonchronologically and with wit by the museum's Pierre Landry, *The Fountain People* provides a glimpse of the homogeneous, packaged, and polished cultural landscape—extending from malls to museums—that the artist has interrogated in myriad ways over the past two decades. Widely in evidence in Montreal was Farmer's fondness for, and inventive use of, provocatively humble and ephemeral materials, as seen in *Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form*, 2002, a sprawling sculptural installation in which packing, cleaning,

and office materials are intricately and whimsically arranged and that, although only one of many works shown here, encapsulates his concerns. In this installation, an enormous disc made up of rows of blank yellow Post-its is adhered to the wall, the artist implying that the sheer laborious accumulation of identical and worthless motifs may in itself constitute an artistic statement. Crumpled bits of paper placed atop and around a trash can could signify a repeated failure to achieve creative fruition—or could delineate the bare-minimum requirement of professional sculptural competency.

Placed alongside this material (or refuse) in a corner, as if in temporary storage, is a cardboard box containing, among other items, plant sculptures composed of foil; the container is set atop a monitor on the floor playing a video of the artist irreverently producing the aluminum flora with his feet—a display of agility to be sure, but also a challenge to the fetishization of art objects. Hanging on the opposite wall is a piece of weathered newspaper with two eyeholes cut in it, as if it were a crude masquerade or a performance prop. A nearby component of the installation demonstrates the tensile strength of such everyday items as packing tape and paper cups, which are strung or glued together as bolstering devices, tripods, and columns—all texturally and chromatically enriched by scattered bits of pink tissue paper.

Such experimentation with the durability of materials exemplifies the process-based nature of Farmer's work, which at its best shows that even throwaway objects like plastic bags and masking-tape rolls can carry expressive gravitas. Farmer questions how and why we assign aesthetic value, in a way that is both biting and heartfelt.

—Dan Adler



Geoffrey Farmer, *Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form*, 2002, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.