

Geoffrey Farmer: Canada Pavilion Venice Biennale

Geoffrey Farmer interviewed by
Lorenzo Benedetti

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LORENZO BENEDETTI: BBPR architects designed the Canadian Pavilion in 1958. It is an asymmetrical, complex, and discursive architecture that is continuing in a certain way in your proposal, where we assist in a collision between different elements: from personal references to a collective symbolic identity. Your participation at the 57th edition of the Biennale di Venezia seems to investigate the role of the place and its manifold meanings. What was the starting point?

GEOFFREY FARMER: There is a sculpture of a tortoise in my project that is a copy of a wooden one I found in the coffee area of the Kunstgiesserei in St. Gallen, where I developed and made the work for Venice. It reminded me of a story attributed to a lecture that Bertrand Russell gave on the nature of our galaxy. At the end of the lecture a woman stands up and declares that the lecture was rubbish (Stephen Hawking wrote about it in *A Brief History of Time*). She then goes on to inform Russell that the world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant turtle. Russell asks her, "What the turtle is standing on?" and the woman replies, "It's turtles all the way down!"

The tortoise in my project is resting on the floor of the pavilion, with a book balanced on its back, and on top of this is an empty food can spewing water. In my mind, it is also linked to an illustration from Zakariya al-Qazwini's book *Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing*, which was written in the thirteenth century.

When I arrived at the pavilion for the first time, I found a small sprout cracking out of its seed. It looked like a turtle with something growing out of its back. It was expanding into a greater being from a very small existence. I looked at the Canadian Pavilion, the trees sprouting out of it, the deep roots emerging out of the ground around my feet, and I realized that this tortoise, this pavilion, this site, this moment was the starting point of the project.

LB: The history of the Canadian Pavilion, as with all the pavilions in the Giardini, is a combination of many different layers, showing that elements like topography or architecture all have symbolic meanings translating the past in present form. Your presence seems to be about a kind of awareness of being in a highly symbolic place.

GF: What I discovered by digging a little around the pavilion is that it sits on the rubble of the former Castello quarter that was torn down by Napoleon. If you dig deeper than fifty centimeters, you need to have

an archaeologist present. The Canadian Pavilion was paid for by war reparation money and designed by BBPR, a Milanese architectural firm whose founding member died in the Mauthausen extermination camp for being a resistance fighter. When the firm reestablished after the war, one of their first projects was a nonfigurative monument for the victims of the concentration camps. They designed the Canadian Pavilion ten years later, and it sits next to the German Pavilion, whose only renovation after the war was having the eagle and swastika removed. BBPR chose what many in Canada have interpreted as a kind of tipi design, which when you consider the genocide that occurred to the Indigenous peoples with the arrival of the Europeans, creates a very complicated and highly symbolic place.

LB: One of the starting points are some images of your grandfather's truck crash. The translation in an extended bronze installation and the use of water creates an interesting concept of anti-monumentality.

GF: I recently found these photographs of an accident he was involved in 1955. A train hit his lumber truck and hurled it down the track, spreading lumber planks in a chaotic arrangement. It is an image that also describes the economic and resource extraction occurring at that time in Canada. The discovery of the collision, and his death, explained a lot of the dynamics I experienced with my father. The physical violence I experienced as a child seemed connected to it and is perhaps why the photographs felt familiar to me. I began to understand the impact it had on my father's life, and unknowingly on mine. I began to understand the shame attached to his experience of poverty as a child, and my family's escape from poverty in Great Britain, and the impact of this migration on the people who had already been inhabiting North America for thousands of years. It's turtles all the way down.

Four mythical creatures: a humanoid with his head in his chest, a human-headed turtle, and two half-sectioned women. From a copy of *'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt* (*Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing*) by al-Qazwini (d. 1283/682). Neither the copyist nor illustrator is named, and the copy is undated. The nature of paper, script, ink, illumination, and illustrations suggest that it was produced in provincial Mughal India, possibly the Punjab, in the 17th century.





The Multitudinous See

An Interview with Geoffrey Farmer

March 2017

Interviews

[Robert Enright](#), [Meeka Walsh](#)

A collision can be many things. In collage it's the overlay and the edges, the abutment that either creates or disassembles meaning. In a rapid succession of film edits the collision of images interrupts and then creates narrative. Think of Canadian filmmaker Arthur Lipsett's brilliant short film *Very Nice, Very Nice*, 1961, or Guy Maddin's "feature length" movie *The Heart of the World*, 2000, complete in six minutes. Look at Caravaggio's painting *Triumph of Early Love*, 1601-02, where Cupid's wing brushes his own thigh and the collision of feather and skin generates a charged auto-eroticism. It's what art historian Dickran Tashjian refers to in Joseph Cornell's boxes (*Boatload of Madmen*, Thames and Hudson, 1995), writing that it's the "element of anxiety, generated by initially benign images in mysterious juxtaposition," and it's the accidental encounter—more precisely—a collision at a railway crossing between a moving freight train and a flatbed truck. 1955.

Geoffrey Farmer told *Border Crossings*, in the interview which follows, that the true nature of how he thinks is associative. Looking at his work, reading what has been written about it, and in his own texts and discussions, it seems that in every case, for Farmer the piece lies in the process of its own making. An orchestral parallel comes to



Collision, 1955. Photographer unknown.
Archives the artist.



Collision, 1955. Photographer unknown.
Archives the artist.

mind. The music begins, all the instruments are brought in by the artist's conducting hand, all moving together to produce a single composite sound. Then nothing, a caesura, what Farmer calls "a collapse and a great silence appears that feels expansive and electric."

Vanessa Desclaux, in her essay "To fabulate is to fabricate giants," for the publication accompanying Geoffrey Farmer's exhibition at Witte de With in Rotterdam in 2008, identified Farmer's interest in the double, the void and infinity, in his seeing history's sweep as one of continual emptying and filling. It's entirely consistent with his diaristic reading of scale as time rather than volume, almost tide-like in its rhythmic presence—continuous but shifting, empty, full and moving. The void is there not as loss or absence but generative, as it is for David Altmejd, who represented Canada in Venice in 2007 and constructed a work to inhabit the Canadian Pavilion. For Altmejd the void is a state of limitless potential—an expansive place from which to begin. An early sculpture of his beloved sister, Sarah, shows a full and lustrous head of auburn hair pulled back in a tail and bound with a turquoise elastic. Turn the sculpture around and the face is absent—a black void surrounded by an encrustation of crystals and jewels. Not an absence but a richness of possibilities.

Geoffrey Farmer's sister recently sent him two black and white photographs he hadn't previously seen. One showed a train having collided with a lumber truck. There's a strange unreality to the photo; the freight train, a little blurred, appears to still be moving. The door on the passenger side of the truck is open and the truck is angled in the ditch along the track. The heavy, cruciform sign "Railway Crossing" has been tossed diagonally across the top of the cab intersecting the open door. Lumber is scattered on the road and in the ditch. The truck appears small under the weight of the designating sign, almost model-like in scale, and very still. Geoffrey Farmer's grandfather was apparently uninjured by the crash, although his chest had hit the steering wheel with force. He died a few months after and the photographs—the second taken without the train in the background, and a boy standing near the hood of the truck—were never published. His death obliged Geoffrey's father, a young man at the time, to assume responsibility for the family. The incident was never discussed. The silence was a void which Farmer said was a profound form in his life.



Canada Pavilion, XXIX Venice Biennale, 1958. Photos from the Archives of the National Gallery of Canada.

In Farmer's works there is always a structuring device bringing order where stasis and final resolution is never a sought-after condition. In *Leaves of Grass*, 2012, there was the long, long table, and the chronology; in *Boneyard*, 2013, it was the large circular plinth, and time; with *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, 2009, the puppets are diaristic in the sense that all of them, 365, represent a diurnal measure of time. The texts or annotations that accompany the work add supporting, accretive structure, more rhizomatic than linear.

The piece that Farmer is creating for the Canadian Pavilion is autobiographic. This is a significant shift for the artist, who intends it to move beyond the personal in its apprehension. He says

organizational frameworks are necessary to “structure the kaleidoscopic nature of my thoughts,” and if you think of a kaleidoscope, it is not a complete object in itself but instead, fragments and parts reflecting possibilities, elusive symmetries and patterns—then Farmer’s need for an organizing structure is clear.

When he talked with *Border Crossings* he said a possible title for the Venice installation was “A way out of the mirror,” a line from a poem by Allen Ginsberg, a poet whose work was shaping and critical for Farmer as a young man in the ’90s. If the kaleidoscopic, mirrored, bright and endlessly shifting panoply of images is a quick parallel Farmer sometimes draws as a reflection of the nature of his mind, then “a way out of the mirror,” to connect more broadly from the personal, as he said he intends to do with this first autobiographical work, is an apt title. The date of its writing corresponds to the time of the Canadian Pavilion’s construction, which in turn shares commonality with his grandfather’s accident and death and the subsequent and significant change in the direction his father’s life was obliged to take. Farmer connects these events to Canada’s beginning to develop its own cultural identity and here incorporating Indigenous iconography and history into its own developmental myth-making. He links Italy’s intention to make post-war reparations in building the Canadian Pavilion, which itself was constructed on the rubble of a neighbourhood ordered torn down by Napoleon during his Italian campaign, to his own act of personal archaeology, digging down through the past to discover his present. From excavating and illuminating his past will come reconciliation; the void or absence of knowledge and understanding had created a rift with his father, and he sees a kinship between his paternal relationship and Canada’s implementing its process with Canadian Indigenous peoples. He speaks about trauma, his own, and the searing national condition. Always seeking the organizing structure

—the frame around which the work is built, or the support that lifts it into the coherence he wants, or the critical central column or stalk around which it rings—Geoffrey Farmer has identified the black and white press photograph as the generative anchor for this new Venice work.

A collision of two large moving machines—train and truck, a collision by way of Farmer’s working technique, a collision between his individual history and his desire to have it reach others. “If I were going to come up with a story of how I became an artist, I would say it is in this collision and the death of my grandfather. It’s my origin story as an artist.”



Model of Canada Pavilion, intervention by Geoffrey Farmer. Photo: Iacopo Seri.

This interview was conducted by phone in two parts: the first to the artist’s Vancouver studio on January 9, 2017, and the second to Banff on January 21, 2017.

Border Crossings: I’m interested in the combination of a research-based practice and your own intuitive sense about where that research leads. I assume those two things are complementary processes in the making of your work.

Geoffrey Farmer: Yes, I think it might work the same way in science or in any situation where you have hunches and you’re experimenting and exploring ideas. An idea is in the process of emerging, so there is a lot that you don’t really know. You have already hooked the idea, but you’re still in the process of reeling it in. David Lynch often uses this metaphor. Your intuition leads you to

explore even in the presence of uncertainty. In my case dismantling or cutting something up has been where the work and my understanding of the work emerges. The cutting up unhinges things, it introduces the idea of mutability. You can transform it and move it around and shift it and juxtapose it in ways that you couldn't if it were still a cohesive whole. It breaks into parts in a way that I imagine as an alphabet that I can then rearrange and create new sentences.

****So the dismantling of the preconceived alphabet allows you essentially to create your own language. If it is a deconstructive process, it is also inevitably for you a reconstructive one as well? ****

The reconstruction is important because, for example, in a piece like *Leaves of Grass* I was destroying the frame of the photographer, cutting apart everything the photographer had constructed. Like dismantling a watch with finely tuned springs. Even though it allowed me to understand what the photographer had constructed, something was lost, something needed to be returned. This was enacted in the painstaking labour of gluing the images onto dried grass stalks and then organizing them in chronological order, reuniting them as a whole. And this organization was also spontaneous and creative. So the reconstruction is important: it allows the viewer to experience something that already existed but in a different way, just



Research material arrangement. Photo: Iacopo Seri.

simply because you didn't have to take the magazines out of the box and flip through them. We had performed that labour in the studio. There was an excitement I felt from within the magazine for the figures to interact in new ways, to wander off their page and onto another.

In *Whitman's Leaves of Grass* one of the great lines is that "I contain multitudes." It strikes me that your quest for meaning is Whitmanesque. He mixes a measured cosmology with the minutiae of "beetles rolling balls of dung." I get a sense you're after the same range.

The impulse for me was one that I only recognized over time: it was to have a multitude, an encyclopedic number of things with which to play around, to juxtapose, to arrange, to order or to disorder. That impulse has been to present what could be a cosmology. Also, I believe it is a way that I deal with some anxieties I have about the of scale of things, in a cosmological sense. It allows me not to have anxiety about making choices. How can you be anxious about making one out of a multitude of choices? If I spread them out it seems easier to make a choice or even to forget that I am making choices at all. But more importantly it is a way for me to express the absolute awe that I have for the complexity and diversity of our experience.

Rather than being a comfort, having so many possibilities is a situation that could become a source of anxiety or terror.

The terror for me is to have to make one choice. If someone says to me, "What is your favourite movie?" I can't say. For me it is always shifting and changing. I think that also happens with the work. Each exhibition gets reconfigured, again and again, and that disperses the

anxiety I feel in making a definitive statement. The work does have a framework though: *Leaves of Grass* has the table and a chronology as a structuring device.

In the case of *Boneyard*, the limitation is the books you use to trace the history of sculpture from 10 AD to the 1960s. The framework is temporal and in one way the framing device is the question of sculptural representation. Is that a way of avoiding chaos?

Yes, the framing creates the tensions within the work and in those two pieces, *Leaves of Grass* and *Boneyard*, it allows the viewer to see the entirety as a form in itself. In *Boneyard* the circular plinth is important in creating a structuring device, and there are parameters that load the piece with energy in the same way that a photographer, in a traditional sense, might use the frame as a dynamic form to create tensions within the image.

You have used very different strategies of presentation in your work; *The Last Two Million Years* reads very differently than *Boneyard* or *Leaves of Grass*. One seems like display; the other more like social congregation. Does each piece generate its own form?

Yes, *Leaves of Grass* was a gift from Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov. It was a collection they had, and then *Boneyard* was sent to me by Ted Rettig, a sculptor in Toronto who thought I might be interested in this deaccessioned collection of books from the university where he was a professor. *The Last Two Million Years* was from a book that I found. The title seemed like a provocation; the thought that you could contain two million years in a book. It was really the first of this cut-out trilogy and the first that was reconfigurable. In that sense it is spontaneous and intuitive, but at the same time it's a personal history lesson as I learn about the

individual figures and their place in history. The figures themselves have some say about where they might go; they might be walking, or in a boat, or objects and images from history might determine their place. If they're smaller they could come forward on the plinth, or if they're larger I could recess them. I order them in ways that are both logical and illogical. Some figures work better in a procession; some look like they're stopping. If they have their hands up I might put them literally in a place where they stop a procession. Their read might be literal or historical or poetic.



Research, Sitterwerk Art Library, St Gallen, Switzerland. Photos: Geoffrey Farmer.

Do you have files that are organized in such a way that if you're looking for a cowboy or a body part you can find the required image? What is the nature of your archive?

When we were cutting out the figures for *Leaves of Grass* in the studio there was an organizational system established in the beginning, but as soon as chronology came into my mind, we had to backtrack and reorganize everything. I created a system of classification so that I knew where the cars were, or the military vehicles, or figures and groups of figures, advertising, objects,

commodities and so on. That was just a practical way that categorical systems functioned in order for me to install that work. Everything had to be organized and flat-packed in relationship to where it existed within the magazine in terms of time. When the Vancouver Public Library threw out their 60-year-old clipping library, we were

able to save 15 boxes from being tossed into the recycling. The librarians had organized it in a way that reminded me of what I was already doing in the studio, which was creating these categorical systems on the fly. If they needed to be augmented we would just write that in. You could start out with the broad category of “War” and then you might go to “animals at war,” “women in war,” or “airships and airplanes.” We were mimicking the way a librarian might organize things. Whereas a piece like *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, which was about a bookstore, had to do with creating figures from body parts. So that work would have files with headings like lips, eyes, jewellery, plants, big hands, small hands, objects, flora, fauna, birds and things like that. Cutting the images out of the magazine created a kind of chaos, but you can also see some kind of thoughtful order and meaning-making going on. That was the case with *Leaves of Grass*. It was really important that you see it as an explosion of images and then you understand you’re seeing a chronology that actually took a lot of labour to order and to maintain. So it’s not just pure chaos.

Your individual collage figures, like the group that turns up in *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, are clearly carefully made. You put that much time and effort into a single figure and then you place it in a congregation of figures. What does that do to the perception of the single figure?

I think it is the nature of how we experience our lives. I don’t know if you’ve had the experience of going to the airport for an early morning flight: you wake up in your house and you pack your belongings and there is an intensity to the singularity of that narrative. But when you get to the airport everyone is coming together and your narrative is obliterated by the nature of being processed in this social form. It can be shocking and you see a lot of

anxiety as people go through this experience. Similarly, in my work all the labour and the specificity disappear and it's not important anymore. That's why it is important for me to have these labelling systems or text associated with what I'm exhibiting, like in *The Last Two Million Years* or *The Surgeon and the Photographer*. It's not about the preciousness of the cutout or the form, but something else is being conveyed.

In *The Metal Will Stand Tall* from 2011, you add the parenthetical title, "a single image is not a splendor." It occurs to me the title is not particular to that piece, but addresses a larger understanding about how you view your work.

It is always a battle for me. When I was working on *Leaves of Grass* I wanted to focus on an historical moment, let's say like the assassination of Martin Luther King or Robert Kennedy. I thought I could somehow make these focal points, but there was so much happening at that time and there were so many other cutouts that the specificity of those events was obliterated. That's not to say that I don't think specificity is important and that everything becomes a wash of generality. What I do with the text is to have places where I can say something from my perspective about that specificity.



Leaves of Grass, 2012, LIFE magazine (1935–85), archival glue, miscanthus grass, oral foam and wooden table, dimensions variable. Installation view, dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

There is a section in *Leaves of Grass* where a number of cameras appear. It seems like a meta-section, where you're drawing our attention to the ways in which the images are first generated.

That was happening in the 1980s when digital cameras were starting to emerge and there were more and more ads in the magazines for video cameras and new technologies. By focusing them at the end, I was foreshadowing the death of the magazine as we were entering the digital realm. I also wanted to express a kind of cannibalism. It was the period when there were images of Princess Diana or Marilyn Monroe, images of war, and placing them with Suzanne Sontag's warning about the medium in *On Photography* allowed me to say something about the power of photography and the effect images have on our lives.

Your interest in taking the image apart and putting something else together again is essentially a description of how collage functions. As you know, collage has a long tradition and particularly in the 20th century—I'm thinking of John Heartfield and Hannah Höch, and moving through to an artist like Wangechi Mutu. The first two use collage in a distinctly political way and Mutu focuses on the representation of the black body. Do you think your collage operates within a particular frame of reference governed by historical time?

In the beginning I didn't know what I was doing because I was just cutting the works out and treating them as objects in three-dimensional space. Because you can see the figures amongst other figures it creates the sense of collage. But I felt that I wasn't really doing collage work and even though I would love my work to refer to those histories, it had more to do with exploding the technology of printed matter and photography. I think from the beginning magazines were made to be cut up, so that individuals could use them to make their own meaning or create their own wall of desire. I was just continuing in that tradition. When I think back, it has less to do with the individual page than with a collective project that is attempting to depict something un-depictable. *The Last Two Million Years* as the title for a book seemed absurd to me. Calling a magazine *Life* was in itself a kind of conjectural work. I was interested in investigating that. To depict the world was something I wanted to explore and that was how the work emerged. I wasn't necessarily thinking in a political sense, even though I know the particular politics of the owner of *Life* and that the life being depicted was life in the United States. I wasn't interested in simplifying things, but in keeping that complexity inherent within the work.

All your works begin with an idea; you have a conceptual framework and then you find a way to build an object around that idea.

There needs to be some framework and some structure for the work. For example, labour has played an important role and that labour becomes a kind of rigour. *In Leaves of Grass* you could mindlessly cut out all these images, but my interest was in selecting the ones that I cut out, keeping them in chronological order, and then arranging them within that chronological order. That work was like doing research for a thesis on the image and the magazine and history seen through the magazine's eyes.

The investment of time and energy you made could also be seen as madness. The other side seems to be extraordinarily compulsive.

I see it as a reflection of modernity, of the compulsiveness of our lives and the compulsive continuation of factories and material things. We desire the books, the knowledge and the systems that are developing. So there is a compulsiveness to it. A friend of mine in Milan called me a visionary artist once, and it really shocked me. I was initially insulted but it stuck with me and I think there is some truth there. I am so much drawn to conceptual types of work, to the intellection of things, but when I think of *Leaves of Grass* for *Documenta* it really is like a work for a world's fair, where people could be eating popcorn and then looking at the work. Like New York city made out of toothpicks. It functioned as a spectacle. But there needs to be a rigour about how the structuring device functions, it has to create a form and a certain level of order so that it's not completely overwhelming. Some kind of engine has to be operating. I'm making work for a context. But I think it is also a reflection of who I am. Each artist brings something different and this is what I bring. To do

anything other than that doesn't feel right. I can always feel it when I'm doing something that is not really authentic.

Sound has continued to play a role in your work. In *Let's Make the Water Turn Black* you go to the life and art of Frank Zappa. What was it that made you build a piece around him?

I found a record of his and became intrigued with the title, and then I started to listen to his music, which I found quite difficult. But listening to his compositions fascinated me more and more. I was intrigued by his tendencies to want everything in one song, with the encyclopedic way he was working and with the kind of mash-ups that were occurring within his music. Listening to his music and finding pleasure in it opened up a world for me. I felt like there was a kind of rewiring of my brain. Music is revolutionary because it can rewire the way you're experiencing things and in discovering pleasure it can have a radical effect.



The Surgeon and the Photographer, 2009, paper, textile, wood and metal,

In *The Surgeon and the Photographer* two of the visual tropes that come up consistently are the eye and the hand. Was that another example of what you found in the archive?

That piece came out of the experience of holding a book in the bookstore. I started to think that the images in the book had some relationship to the hand because that's how you hold a book. So I took a book apart and started cutting out the images and putting them on a form that was about

365 gures, each approximately 17.75 x 5 x 5 inches. Installation view, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2015. Photo: Rachel Topham. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

the size of a hand. To my surprise, these characters began to appear out of the books and looked back at me. The piece became about creating figures and personalities with the capacity to

look back.

The piece produces a very strong sense of engagement. They are small figures but they have an effect dramatically above their scale.

I've been playing around with the way that work has been exhibited. I showed it recently in Boston at the ICA and created a shelving system so that I didn't have to exhibit all of them at once. They go back on a shelf as books, and I liked this return to the shelf, which somehow stabilized the chaotic nature of the work.

So every time you reinstall one of your works it becomes a new piece?

It's a way of learning and developing. I learned a lot from my Vancouver Art Gallery survey. I came back to the show a couple of days before it closed, and it felt so full of work that it was oppressive. So the next time I had an exhibition, I worked on creating more space for the viewer by holding back. This is how the shelving came about for *The Surgeon and The Photographer*. I needed to create an ordering that could justify my including only a few of the pieces. It worked better. If you present everything at once it can be completely overwhelming and fatiguing. It's important to consider this.

I'm interested in how you regard the annotations that accompany the individual puppets. They are both fascinating and perplexing. In *The Surgeon and the Photographer* some of them are descriptive,

and I get the connection between the image and the language that goes with it. But there are cases that have a whole story. There is one about a character not wanting to leave a place because his heart will break; it ends with the declaration that “I want more than ever to become a good painter.” It seems to be more directly about you.

For me the annotations are really the work. It's as if I make the sculptures as an excuse to make the annotations. The annotations structure the work in a way that gives it some tension. I want them to be inconsistent in the way that the voice functions. It jumps around, just as the images do. I can say a lot of things because it has a multitude of voices, and a lot of the texts are collaged from different sources. Then I alter them. It is like titling, which is something I really enjoy. It can be contradictory, and it gives a figure or the forms something to play off of. In that sense, it is almost musical and allows me to express myself in ways that can be both humorous and quite poignant. To me it has to do with cinema, especially with *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, which I see as a kind of film, or a multitude of films. In that work it was like I was scriptwriting for different characters.

I think of a piece, the name of which begins, “This is where the plate goes...,” and what follows is a series of connections that seems to be novelistic. They remind me of Raymond Roussel. The connections you make are not surreal, but they're not logical either. You seem to be making some other kind of metaphoric or poetic connection.



Leaves of Grass, 2012, LIFE magazine (1935–85), archival glue, miscanthus grass, oral foam and wooden table, dimensions variable. Installation view, dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

Absolutely. The way they function in all the works is as another layer that allows people to spend more time with the figures and for me to add another layer of intentionality. It has the potential for viewers to make their own meaning, in particular with that piece. And it has the potential for discovery because some of them are poignant, and some of them are funny and unexpected as well, and it can feel like one of those exquisite corpses. Two things are meeting, and in that meeting something happens.

I've got to say that I'm surprised by the fact that the image is made to generate the language. Could the annotations stand alone?

I made it so that you could take the book away and the book could exist, but always in relationship to the figures. It is important for people to know that the work is not about the preciousness of the figure. I don't want it to be about that, even though that's part of the

work. I think the work needed to have contradictions. With the figures you may be looking at something that appears to be quite precious, and then you walk around it and it turns into something else. To be honest, the most enjoyable part of that particular work was the writing of the annotations.

There is a section in *Leaves of Grass* where Whitman says, “Do I contradict myself? Well then, I contradict myself.” I thought of it when I came across two of your titles; one has a figure instructing the viewer to “look at my face so you know who I am,” which I took as sound advice, but then not long after one of the narrative titles repeats the phrase, “if you stare at it long enough, things will change.” So looking at the face may give you meaning but the more you look at it, the more it changes. The contradiction is built into your phenomenology.

Well, I think we’re continually contradicting ourselves and as much as we want to be consistent beings, we’re not. I wanted to have that in the work as well. Even though I can frame it in a consistent way by having a very particular structuring device, I can allow for contradictions and idiosyncrasies and for the occurrence of complexity.

There are precedents for the kind of congregation of images you’ve made. I’m thinking of Aby Warburg’s *Memory Atlas*, Walter Benjamin’s *Archive* and André Malraux’s *Imaginary Museum*. Warburg operates within a specific time frame. I sense that he wanted to break free of a conventional narrative that looked at sculpture in a causal way. Do you want to frustrate the notion of a conventional narrative?

Two things are occurring. One is that I do value what people have thought about and made over time, which has to do with the labour of thinking, of considering and of writing about history and art. But at the same time I value the ability to play around with it, treat it in different ways, be curious about it, and understand it in my own way that makes it fresh and alive.

In looking at your work I think of different artists, Kim Adams and his *Bosch-Breughel Bus*, Mike Nelson and his *Amnesiac biker gang*, and James Ensor and his painting of *Christ's Entry into Brussels*.

I think the work is inherently associative and that is part of what I want to occur. I have impulses to create certain framing devices and ways that the viewer comes to encounter the work in the beginning, and there can be a baroqueness to it. I am attracted to different kinds of work but it seems like the work I have been making has this sense of multitude and the ability to experience that through photography and the miniaturization of the world. It's actually an experiment and an investigation. Something happened to me in collecting, working with, organizing and presenting so many images. I learned something from that experience. It was an ad hoc history lesson.

Your sense of scale is intriguing. In an early work you include the fuselage of a 767 plane. Is that fearlessness about scale something that came naturally? Was it an act of will more than imagination?

No, it just occurred through repetition. I don't think of scale; I think of units. For example, in *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, I was producing these small units in my garage; it was a way to cope with the size of my working space. I could make them at a table and it was about duration. The scale didn't really occur to me until we started to put them into crates. To me it was more about a number and 365

days seemed like a logical number to me. It was diaristic; a number relating to life. I thought it might bring the figures to life. But also I have learned about numbers by physically handling them. You get a much better sense of 27 thousand when you cut out or arrange that number. It turns out to be quadruple that amount in handling, cutting, packing, unpacking and arranging. But this is nothing when you consider numbers in the world. This is something that I learned making a work like *Leaves of Grass*: the catastrophic effect of WWII where between 50 to 80 million people were killed. Or now, the 11 million Syrians that have had to flee their homes. This is unimaginable, but we must attempt to comprehend the scale and scope of it.

In *Leaves of Grass* there was a prevalent use of black and white mixed with colour. Are those decisions made in the construction of the piece?

It was what was happening in the magazines between 1945 and 1950. Initially, colour was mostly being used by advertisers, and then there was this dramatic post-war shift to colour beyond that. Perhaps I organized it to be more dramatic. When I was making the piece and flipping through each magazine, it was like a slow-motion film. The first full-colour ads for candy were shocking. They felt like they were in 3D. It was dramatic. I realized during that experience that these were the



Leaves of Grass, 2012, LIFE magazine (1935–85), archival glue, miscanthus grass, oral foam and wooden table, dimensions variable. Installation view, DOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012. Photo: Anders Sune Berg.

magazines Andy Warhol would have flipped through and would have seen his rows and rows of Campbell's soup cans, or images that Robert Rauschenberg or Hannah Höch would have ripped out and used. It was an interesting experience to see how the magazine changed. Very different editorial shifts occurred in the United States. You see the emerging propaganda created by advertisers: the formation of a mythology, the creation of the American myth and the Marlboro Man—and all things that came after the Second World War.

Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
Vancouver.

You have an annotation where you say that “reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images.”

This is a quote from an essay Susan Sontag wrote in 1977. I recently read Kaja Silverman's *The Miracle of Analogy: Or The History of Photograph Part I* and I strongly connected to it after my experience of handling so many images. I began to think of images as analogy and not just representation. Both Sontag and Silverman write about Whitman but in very different ways, and I value both. But in Silverman's book, there was an immediate and deep connection to her idea that images are the world's primary way of revealing itself to us. But photographic images are not fixed and continue to develop over time with us.

Does the Venice project have a name?

I am thinking of titling it “A way out of the mirror,” which is a line from a poem by Allen Ginsberg. It is from his book *Kaddish And Other Poems*, 1958–1960. I wanted to find a poem or a line from a poem written around the time the Canadian Pavilion was built, but also

something that connected to my
experience of making the work,
something that could guide me.

The lines surrounding this are:

History will keep repeating itself
forever like the woman in the image on
the Dutch Cleanser box

A way out of the mirror was found by
the image that realized its existence
was only...

a stranger completely like myself

A way out for ever! has not been found to enter the ground whence
the images

rise, and repeat themselves

Kaddish is a prayer for the dead, so does that tie into the work?

Yes. Part of the project came out of a press photograph my sister sent me that I hadn't seen before, of an accident involving my grandfather in 1955. It is an image of a train colliding with his lumber truck at the Flannigan Mill, in Port Mann, BC. It is a pretty dramatic image. What makes it so compelling is the scattering of all this lumber and the rail-crossing sign that landed on his truck. It creates a striking composition that is further constructed by the photographer. We found another one in which the photographer has placed a small boy holding an apple among the wreckage, and you can tell in comparing



Production, Venice. Photo: Geoffrey
Farmer.

the images that some boards have been moved to make it a better picture. Adding a figure to a news story is an old ploy used by press photographers. As far as I know, the photographs were never published because my grandfather didn't die immediately. He died a couple of months afterwards.

As a result of the accident?

It was never spoken about in my family but my father had suspicions that his death was associated with the accident. His chest had hit the steering wheel and it was quite a strong impact. I never met my grandfather, who was an absent figure in my life. But I was really interested in the silence around the accident and his death. I realized intuitively it was a void that has this form in my life. There was some kind of familiarity about it that I felt explained a lot about my father's behaviour. Traumatic things are passed through generations and psychological or ideological or emotional structures are handed down in a way that is maybe not so direct or obvious. Strangely, I ended up removing my father's last name and my grandfather's name from mine at about the same age my father was when his father died. Now that we have begun to talk about the accident, we realize it was a traumatic event in my father's life, and while he never spoke about it, we experienced it through emotionally violent reactions he would have. You grow up in a context that you accept as completely normal but as you get older you begin to realize it has a certain specificity. My sister sending me this photograph was a way of saying it might be an explanation for some things within the family. Obviously I was interested because it existed as a photograph and I have used photographs in past work, but the ones I used belonged to other people, or press photographs of other people's accidents and traumas. I decided to start with this image that had been held within my family but that I hadn't known about. I thought if I examined and

studied it and tried to understand what this collision and its trauma meant in my life, I could move from a personal narrative to other narratives and start to construct the work for Venice. I needed a central, gravitational force to begin the process of figuring out the work. I think of the press photograph as a kind of anchor that is generative, a guide or doorway to connect to my family, to myself and to the world.

You talked earlier about the necessity of an organizational framework, so *Leaves of Grass* had the table and the chronology. Is the photograph the organizing framework for this exhibition?

The photograph yes, and also using my life as the chronology around which to construct the work. The accident happened around the time the Canadian Pavilion was being constructed in Venice. It was first referred to in 1955 and it opened in July of 1958. This also connects to the time period of the first reading of *Howl*, and *Kaddish*. The Canadian Pavilion was payment for war reparations, which is a reconciliation; Italy was reconciling with Canada over war. The pavilion is literally built on rubble of a neighbourhood torn down on orders from Napoleon, who wanted to build a park. The pavilion sits on the only hill in Venice. If you dig below 50 centimetres you have to have an archeologist on site because of what you might find. I dug down just to that limit. One of the works is a bronze cast of a hole which I dug using a shovel from the First World War that we got from the War Museum that is about 300 feet from the pavilion. I dug down through the foundation of the pavilion.

So you're your own archeologist?

I was digging only to 50 centimetres but I learned a lot from digging that hole. At first it was rough digging but the deeper I got, the more

delicate the process became, until finally I was using a brush and tweezers. It seemed to mirror the process of following an idea to make a work.

And your piece is built around the rubble of the accident?

Yes, I was thinking about superimposing these histories because there is a reconciliation occurring with my father in talking about the traumatic event that he had never spoken about. In this sense I am also reclaiming my father and grandfather's place in my life. This is an emotional process, which is represented through the flowing of water. It made me think a lot about the nature of history: what is visible and what isn't. But I also thought about history and emotion, and the emotional nature of history, which is a lot harder to comprehend or discuss. It's the trauma of history. I was thinking about Canada as a family, about the different stories that aren't spoken about, and the kinds of reconciliation that are occurring in different forms within the country. Reconciliation that is necessary and can only occur through the expression of emotion on both parts. So for me it was a way to begin to connect my own personal investigation of my family with the construction and history of the pavilion, with its connection to war reparations and with Canada in the 1950s, which was attempting to construct a unique cultural identity through documents like the Massey Report from 1951.



Production, Venice. Photo: Geoffrey Farmer.

As well as constructing a culture, because The Canada Council comes out of the Massey Report.

Absolutely. Part of the reason the pavilion was built was to extend this new vision describing a uniquely Canadian art. I also didn't want to disregard the building, which I think has been a strategy that artists have used in the past; it's been referred to as turning the lights off. Janet and George built a theatre within it to great success; David Altmejd used mirrors in a fantastic manner to open it up and to obliterate it in a way; Rebecca Belmore's *Fountain* has been important; as was Rodney Graham using it as a cinema and Steven Shearer's restoration, where he returned the space to the way it was meant to be used in the 1950s. But being me, I wanted to look at the building and its history; at how it was constructed and what it's lying on, who were its architects and how can I find meaning in it for myself. All these things will become part of the work.

In previous works you've had a personal investment in the material but you have gone to other sources to find it. This work in Venice is quite particular. The "anchor," as you call it, for this show is deeply personal.

It's personal but it is also foreign to me in that I never knew my grandfather, and because he was never spoken about, there's an objectivity to the image. But the story explained a lot about my relationship with my father. There was a lot of misunderstanding and I feel now that I am able to have empathy for my father and his experience as a man in the 1940s and '50s, growing up in Vancouver in a lower income working-class family. I can understand the impact all that had on him. He was only 21 years old when his father died. My grandfather had a lumber truck and at night his other business was to collect scraps of wood, out of which he made kindling to sell

in the neighbourhood. My father was involved in that as a child. My grandfather's death had a major impact on the economy of the family, so my father took on that role and worked all his life. He was able to escape his class boundaries by becoming a lawyer, but I think he would have become an artist if he hadn't had to take on the responsibility for the family. When he retired from being a Crown prosecutor 20 years ago, he started painting. Today he has a studio and is a painter.



Production, Venice. Photo: Geoffrey Farmer.

Tell me about how the *pater familias* will mingle with the cultural history of the country.

Central to that investigation is a collision, this idea of two things coming together. I can make analogies to everything from particle accelerators to the cultural collisions that occurred in the construction of Canada. I can also think of colliding in the sense of collage and montage. To me, opposing images coming together abruptly is a kind of collision. Arthur Lipsett has been an important figure to me in the way that he constructed his films in montage. But collision can also be described as a cat's whiskers touching grass as it's walking through a field, so it can be very elegant and not necessarily catastrophic.

Other than the photograph, what will be included in the exhibition?

It will be all sculptural work in varying materials. I am working in cast bronze, aluminum, found material and text. But there are similarities in the way I'm cutting from life and what I'm casting. I am cutting out moments in my life and superimposing and juxtaposing them into the pavilion. It's really like a three-dimensional photograph rendered as sculpture. We're still in process but I would say that there will be six or seven works. Probably more.

You talked about *The Surgeon and the Photographer* as being 'diaristic' and it seems as if the Venice piece will have the same quality.

Yes, it is like I took news from my life. I'm here in Banff working on the publication, which we're now thinking of as a book of images and a book of texts which are annotations of the images.

This is a way for me to create what is almost a diary as a structuring device for the images. That's the way I feel about the photograph of the collision. It helps me create an ordering structure for the work. I can look at a piece like *Howl* or *Kaddish* and understand them through this idea of a collision and what it meant within my family. It creates bridges for me to understand someone else's suffering. It helps me understand a lot of different things, like the culture and the economy at that time, gender roles, what the role of men had been in society, and why my father didn't talk about the accident or the death of his father. There are different socio-economic forces that are also translatable to behaviour or could partially explain how people behaved.



Boneyard, 2013, paper cutouts, wood, glue, dimensions variable. Installation view, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2016. Photo: Charles Mayer Photography. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

It makes sense that you would go to *Howl* and *Kaddish* because both poems are rooted in family. The 'ghosting' of the poems in your work is a sensible one.

Yes, and the reason I'm speaking about Allen Ginsberg is because of the diaristic quality of the piece for Venice. I came into contact with him in San Francisco in the 1990s when I was in art school. He came to the city poetry conference that I attended, and he was being interviewed about poetry. He talked about cadence and about how he stole the voice of Jack Kerouac in order to write his poetry. When he was asked to read a poem he pulled out a squeezebox and began to sing, "Father

Death Blues.” He sang the poem and it had a profound effect on me. I found it shocking. It was so intimate, like a collapse. It felt like a collision to me.

Of course, Ginsberg is the inheritor of a tradition of prophetic poetry coming out of Whitman. So to go from *Leaves of Grass* to *Howl* and *Kaddish* is a sensible shift.

It all gets a bit kaleidoscopic. San Francisco was such a profound time in the '90s; I was there in the middle of the AIDS crisis, I was a young man coming out, and I was discovering art for the first time. I began to understand that there was something you could call gay culture and gay history and who the figures were in that narrative—Whitman, Burroughs, Gertrude Stein. Hearing Ginsberg read his poems for the first time was a radical moment. In a way, the Venice project is an exploration of that time, and I got there thorough the idea of collision. When I saw the photograph of the collision I realized that if I were going to come up with the story of how I became an artist, I would say it is in this collision and the death of my grandfather. It's my origin story as an artist. I think we can create that kind of myth in lots of different ways.



Boneyard, 2013, paper cutouts, wood, glue, dimensions variable. Installation view, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2016. Photo: Charles Mayer Photography. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

You think like a poet. You make connections that can tell a story of self.

The true nature of how I think is associative. I always feel like I am battling it. It is going everywhere, all at once. This is why I make projects with many elements. At some point in the task there is a collapse, and a great silence appears that feels expansive and electric. I think the work has poles and attempts to structure the kaleidoscopic nature of my thoughts. The attempt to structure and order it has been happening through the texts. In a piece like *The Surgeon and the Photographer* the 365 puppets are diaristic portraits. The texts associated with those figures are an attempt to order them. In all the pieces there is this constant rearranging of the materials. In that sense, Venice is an arrangement of significant moments that I have extracted from my life, which I'm collaging together in a way that I guess you could describe as a collision.

The other thing about your ghost influence is that *Kaddish* is dedicated to Ginsberg's mother, so it is rooted in family in the same way the Venice Project is.

There are these serendipitous moments which form our lives, and I also think we are the constructors of our own history. I am arranging these moments in a way that is a portrait of my life. But it needs to be more than that. How to make it meaningful outside of the personal is the goal and the real job. That is where the tension is in the artist's role. ■

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Geoffrey Farmer's "The Big Kitchen"

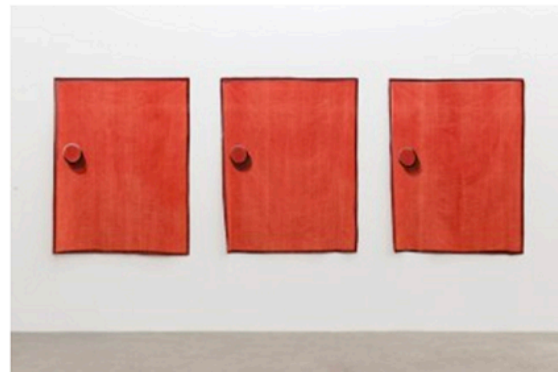
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January 14-February 25, 2017

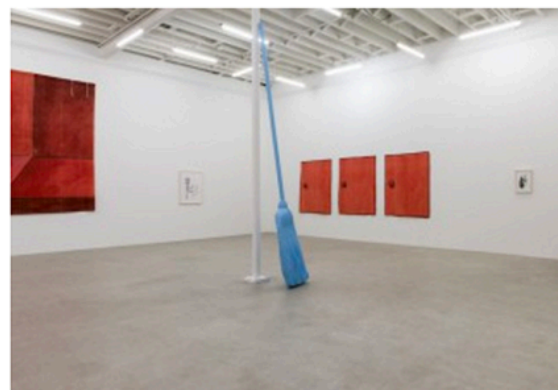
Geoffrey Farmer's lyricism of control is on show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, although this time with a new suggestion of malignity. Farmer is an exponent of the artistic practice of finding a part of a derelict, languishing image, or two, or more, and through juxtapositions translating these elements into novel, revealing modern utterances. In his 2013 installation "The Surgeon and the Photographer" at London's Barbican Centre, for instance, he assembled garlands of excised fragments—a part of a statue here, a leaf, a limb, or garment there—to fashion a community of hundreds of tiny, miscegenous personages in whom you sensed love for themselves and each other.

For this new show, he has discovered and rescued an enormous, painted canvas theatrical backdrop. Made by the set design company R.L. Grosh and Sons on Sunset Boulevard in 1939, it depicts a hellish red kitchen. Farmer takes care to make sure that we know its provenance, and also shares in his notes on the exhibition that kitchens have been significant for him: a source of mystery, worry, and danger, of cold coffee and hard crusts, but also consolation. He seems concerned that the momentousness of these things is now receding in his memory. Cut-out elements of this found backdrop constitute much of the material on show here; on the walls, on the floor, turning corners, sometimes pinned in artful display, other times just left to hang, apparently discarded. Parts of the show are of kitchen utensils displayed in ordered rows, analogues of something possibly mendacious. Parts are cupboards and doorways with their *trompe l'oeil* handles falling into and out of the perspectives they elicit. Parts are just large, crude, unmodulated passages of red wall.

Except they are not crude at all. These fragments of the scenery painter's craft present nuanced conversations between different pitches of red which allow for the play of space and surface and sentiment. Generous, capable brushmarks and confident overpainting provide depth and allusion to the color. Furled and unfurled so many times, the canvas has become scratched, wrinkled and faded, and this distress adds to its visual sophistication. And, catalyzed by a bold accent in the room—a giant, sky blue broom—these found reds reach out mellifluously to one another, to the many pale gray-greens in the polished concrete floor and to whatever tints can be found in the affordable white of the walls. The effect, which is completely arresting, is to seamlessly coordinate the image of the theater of the fiery backdrop with the gallery's own theatrical apparatus. The show appears as a beautiful harmonious study, a successful formal composition in its own right. Dressed so, the room represents a monument to bourgeois tastes in the correct arrangement of color and the satisfying distribution of forms and objects. It brings to mind the words that those other theorists of the "found," Alison and Peter Smithson, used to describe the sensibility of bourgeois space: detailed, expensive, highly controlled, not aggressive, civilized, mind-releasing.(1)



1 Geoffrey Farmer, *BLUBBERED HUBBARD KITCHEN CUPBOARD*, 2017.



2 View of Geoffrey Farmer's "The Big Kitchen," Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, 2017.



3 Geoffrey Farmer, *WOODEN, HIGH, CRUSTY, DUSTY AND SADLY SAGGING*, 2017.

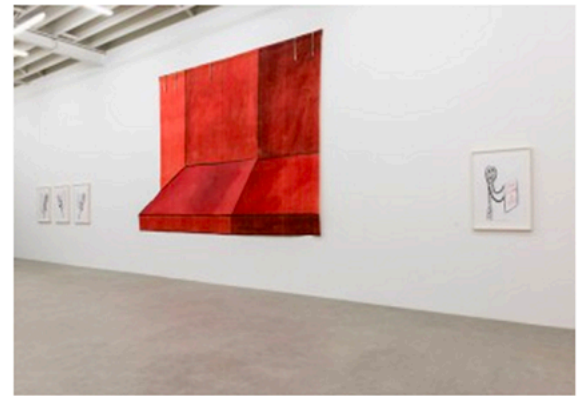
Farmer is an unfailingly interesting artist, and even in the moment of appreciating this confection, one can't easily abate suspicions that his introductory rhetoric is a theatrical feint, a veil. These large pieces of canvas prompt thoughts about how Barnett Newman or Mark Rothko or, in one instance, Terry Atkinson, might go about making a painting. Giant brushstrokes and giant brooms suggest Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg. Even in this though, there is a suggestion that allusions to the theater of postwar art are intended only cursorily. The viewer should continue to look for something else, something less concretely apparent. So, theater after interpretative theater is evoked: theaters of unsettled domesticity, of petty punishment, interpreted dreams... and on, and on.

The question of what is required of a viewer at this conjunction of so many theaters, when a proposition is being made about how to recompose a memory, is left open. But, there's a clue. Interspersing the parts of canvas is a series of framed ink drawings such as *PRESSURE*, *COOKER*, *PENCIL*, *PUSHER*, *MALE*, *HOOKER* and *LARD*, *LOUD*, *PROUD*, *STORM*, *CLOUD* (both 2017). In these, a kind of cartoon character is developed, a political figure maybe, perhaps autobiographical. It is a kitchen spoon. Garrulous, crease-featured, hoarse, and splenetic, it has been given broken, blackened teeth and a smoker's heart. When not asleep or eating, it plays games with a political lexicon and sits barking out complaints in polished, if dubitable rhymes. This cackling spoon, this punning shit-stirrer (shit-disturber, to use the Canadian) speaks not with the technique of Dadaists like Hannah Höch or Richard Huelsenbeck, as one might expect, but one closer to poet Barbara Guest.

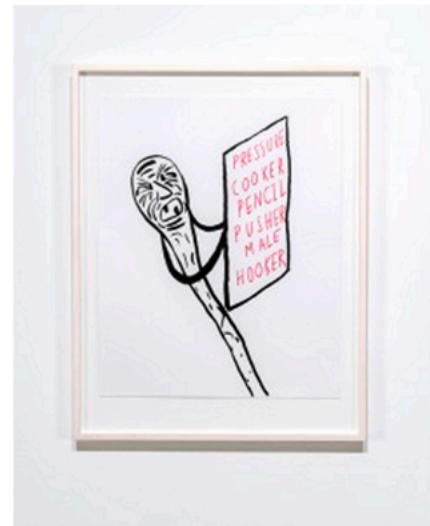
Farmer has an accomplished way with words, whether his own or others', and it seems that there might be, if not exactly a departure from previous work, certainly a shifting of weight; a placing of visual images more at the disposal of literary devices than before. The fiercely poetical incoherence of this spoon's acid, declamatory character, merrily furious in the face of the shadowy insecurity of the homeland, brings to Farmer's kitchen something of E.T.A. Hoffmann's alarming, intelligent malice. In the hilarious and terrifying surreality of our current political theater of bad faith, an oven door as black as the one he gives us here doesn't pass unnoticed, especially when it seems it might have been put there by some wicked witch.

(1) Alison and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Archaeological Aesthetic 1955-1972* (London: Lattimer New Dimensions Limited, 1973), 6.

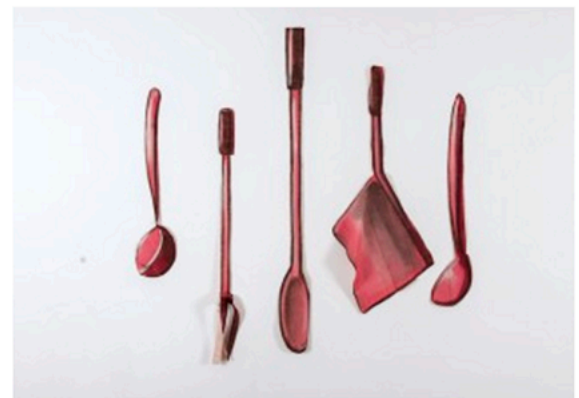
Rob Stone works at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Canada. The author of *Auditions: Architecture and Aurality* (MIT Press), he lives in Chicago and Vancouver.



4 View of Geoffrey Farmer's "The Big Kitchen," Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, 2017.



5 Geoffrey Farmer, *PRESSURE, COOKER, PENCIL, PUSHER, MALE, HOOKER*, 2017



6 Geoffrey Farmer, *ESSENTIAL, PRUDENTIAL, PREHENSILE, UTENSILS*, 2017.



8 Geoffrey Farmer, *COVEN SHOVEN OVEN FOR THE BADLY BEHAVED*, 2017.

1 Geoffrey Farmer, *BLUBBERED HUBBARD KITCHEN CUPBOARD*, 2017. Theater backdrop (1939), 61 3/4 x 164 1/2 inches. All images courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

2 View of Geoffrey Farmer's "The Big Kitchen," Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, 2017.

3 Geoffrey Farmer, *WOODEN, HIGH, CRUSTY, DUSTY AND SADLY SAGGING*, 2017. Theatre backdrop (1939), 94 1/2 x 147 1/2 inches.

4 View of Geoffrey Farmer's "The Big Kitchen," Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, 2017.

5 Geoffrey Farmer, *PRESSURE, COOKER, PENCIL, PUSHER, MALE, HOOKER*, 2017. Ink on paper, 35 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches.

6 Geoffrey Farmer, *ESSENTIAL, PRUDENTIAL, PREHENSILE, UTENSILS*, 2017. Theater backdrop (1939), 56 1/2 x 57 3/4 inches.

7 Geoffrey Farmer, *MID VOWEL AFOUL DISH TOWEL*, 2017. Ink on paper, 17 7/8 x 11 7/8 inches.

8 Geoffrey Farmer, *COVEN SHOVEN OVEN FOR THE BADLY BEHAVED*, 2017. Theater backdrop (1939), 102 3/4 x 117 inches.