



This page: Geoffrey Farmer, *Hunchback Kit*, 2000, crate, lights, electrical cords, drawings, research documents, monitor, VCR, videos, dimensions variable. Installation views. Opposite page, left: Geoffrey Farmer, *Every Surface In Some Way Decorated, Altered, or Changed Forever (Except the Float)* (detail), 2004, mixed media, dimensions variable. Opposite page, right: Geoffrey Farmer, *Catriona Jeffries Catriona* (detail), 2001, sixty-two-day process-based installation.

## First Take

# JESSICA MORGAN ON GEOFFREY FARMER

IT WOULD BE FAIRLY EASY to eat up my allotted space here just describing the various sources of information contained in a typical work by Geoffrey Farmer. Literary, pop-cultural, and art-historical allusions; site-specific details; and gestures to his native Vancouver's local industries and art scene form the structural edifice around which his sculptural and installation-based works develop. Posing a similar challenge to my descriptive faculties is the constantly shifting status of the works-in-process that Farmer generally exhibits, from projects that evolve and grow over weeks, even while they are on view, to finished works that can be installed in multiple arrangements. Such a lengthy effort might be misguided regardless, since Farmer employs these layers of meaning in such a way that the sum of the parts in no way describes the works themselves, which, while they benefit from these various associations, critically address artmaking, exhibiting, and context while embodying a striking and complex formal structure.

Farmer's references generally coalesce around certain ideas of staging or artifice. Some of his works evoke the film industry—its props and illusionism and pervasive presence in Vancouver, which is a kind of prop itself, often used by studios as a cheap stand-in for Los Angeles—or allude to literary sources, from Dickens to Nabokov. But his preoccupation with the theatrical and the staged is also apparent in his use of self-disguise (the presence of doppelgängers or personal proxies) and, not least, in the performative, real-time staging of change and evolution that his works so often involve.

Take, for example, Farmer's *Hunchback Kit*, 2000, an accumulation of objects, or "props," for use in "conceptual adaptations," as the artist terms them, of Victor Hugo's epic novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Placed inside a tall container that opens like a book, the kit includes various objects (a monk's robe, a pair of cardboard shoes for someone with a clubfoot) and a manual that guides the reader through the various ways in which the work might be installed. As the manual makes clear, the work allows for a degree of freedom in assembly: The objects inside can be displayed and presented—that is, staged—in radically different ways with each presentation. This sculptural kit, of course, calls into question the nature of the static, contained object and the role of curator and context in the presentation and meaning of the work, while also testing an institutional desire for ease and convenience in the display of objects.

Two of the artist's most ambitious exhibitions, both at his Vancouver gallery, *Catriona Jeffries*, expanded on these ideas. In the first, he presented *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, 2001, a complex installation of drawings, videos, and performance residue that, per the play on names in the title, suggested that his gallerist had become his double and/or vice versa. A series of "exhibitions within exhibitions" took place during the show; one, "(Her)story," was an experiment in "trying out" feminist performance and process work from the '70s. Working in the gallery space, "Jeffries" reperformed (generally after hours,





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though these semisecret events were presented in video form when the gallery was open) body-art actions and the like, trying on for size the personal, political, and confessional aspects of this currently unfashionable side of '70s art while keeping his act just the right side of irony. Farmer's appropriation, often performed in a black wig mimicking, presumably, the raven-haired gallerist whose persona he mixed with his own, was by no means purely tongue-in-cheek. His craft-oriented attention to making and display could, after all, be said to owe a debt to the typically female artists exploring these genres and to the socially invested political aspirations of their work.

In another show at Catriona Jeffries, Farmer exhibited *Every Surface in Some Way Decorated, Altered, or Changed Forever (Except the Float)*, 2004, a sprawling work that developed over a period of seven weeks at the gallery. Taking as the work's literal and theoretical base the sociosculptural form of the parade float, Farmer created a wooden structure that rose to a height exceeding the ceiling, protruding through a large hole in the roof. He decorated the gallery with homemade-looking masks, costumes, banners, and street posters, adding new material each day and eventually filling the space to the point where navigation was impossible and the "float" was totally obscured. Reminiscent as it was of both celebratory parades and campaign sloganeering, the work hovered ambiguously between politics and parody while drawing directly, as the title implied, on Robert Morris's seminal 1969 process work *Continuous Project*

*Altered Daily*. To immerse oneself in the background detail of Farmer's art, an easy thing to do, is perhaps to get lost in a forest of signs and to miss the overall structural or conceptual gist of the work. The float was in essence a dynamic stage on which Farmer developed his ongoing and increasingly astute investigation of sculpture in its expanded form.

Farmer's recent installation at the Power Plant in Toronto, *A Pale Fire Freedom Machine*, 2005, makes fully apparent the theoretical rigor underlying his aesthetic of accumulation. In this particular manifestation, the work was in essence a vast processing machine for discarded furniture that was cleaned, organized, and ultimately set alight—using an old poster found on one of the desks as tinder—in a fireplace designed by Dominique Imbert. The resulting soot was used to make ink, which in turn was used to print more posters. As usual, the references (to Nabokov, French artist Xavier Veilhan, academic-turned-sculptor Imbert, etc.) are layered, but one in particular is revealing of Farmer's conceptual underpinnings: Martin Kippenberger's 1994 masterpiece *The Happy Ending of Franz Kafka's "Amerika."* The late artist's tendency to comment on, critique, and incorporate the work of others while simultaneously generating new ideas sets the strongest precedent for Farmer's production of complex systems that combine numerous intertextual references while establishing a voice that is unmistakably the artist's own. □

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