

# Geoffrey Farmer on Henry Moore: All that is solid melts into air

“Every days needs an urgent whistle blown into it” is Gershon Iskowitz Prize winner's exhibit at the AGO until Sept. 7.



An image from 'Every day needs an urgent whistle blown into it,' by Geoffrey Farmer at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Farmer, who won the Gershon Iskowitz Prize last year, created a work that recasts the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre in a cascade of light and sound. (COPYRIGHT GEOFFREY FARMER / COURTESY THE AGO)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts

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Geoffrey Farmer is full of surprises.

Just when you think you have a bead on the Vancouver artist's playfully dense, thoughtfully absurd oeuvre, he goes and does this: at the Art Gallery of Ontario last week, Farmer opened a new work in the museum's Henry Moore Sculpture Centre. In the blocky old brutalist space, Farmer has positioned Moore's rough, amorphous works in the precise spots they were originally placed by Moore himself, back in 1972.

In the midst of Moore's coolly primeval forms, Farmer has installed a dense cluster of technology: robotic lights dip and swivel according to an algorithm that runs in time with a sound collage, throwing coloured beams and their resulting shadows around the space and charging the austerity of Moore's high-Modern temple with a haunting urgency.

Farmer made [the piece](#) as part of winning the AGO's Gershon Iskowitz Prize last year. He calls it *Every day needs an urgent whistle blown into it*, and it's apt: sound comes in bursts — a poppy-sounding guitar lick, a saccharin jingle for Bubble Yum — or long, eerie monologues. The light sears Moore's sculptures in sharp relief, projecting overlapping shadow and colour on the walls behind them. In bursts and moments, they live outside themselves: stolid pieces briefly surrounded by wraithlike apparitions, as though spirits had been set loose from their stony bodies.

Granted, I haven't seen Farmer's computer-choreographed multimedia work on Frank Zappa, which is currently on a global jaunt, but I imagine some affinities here. It's less a work — at least in the conventional sense — than an intervention, both into the space and, a little less directly, into the intertwined histories of the gallery and Modernism itself, of which Moore is a towering emblem.

At its core as an esthetic movement, Modernism shilled for a purity of form, guided by material and some quasi-spiritual, primal essence that linked all of mankind. It all seems terribly quaint now in our pluralistic, everyone-in-the-pool social mash-up, but at the time Modernism was a very real attempt to make sense of a radically changing world. The first half of the 20th century was riven by industry, war, radical social change and mass global movements of huge populations at a scale never before seen. The resulting chaos spawned an urge for order and Modernism, among other things, was an answer: a unifying notion that could be extended from artmaking to city-building to craft a universal, democratic experience of an emerging new world.

It didn't quite work out that way and its leftovers — colossal, inhuman public housing blocks, meant to communalize grotty urban living into modest, efficient utopias, became desperate high-density warehouses of poverty and despair; cities cleaved by freeways — still serve as agonizing monuments to that naive idealism.

What does this have to do with Farmer or Moore? Well, a lot. Over the years, Farmer's body of work has a powerful strain running through it, both of unpacking history and dismantling its mechanics. A breakout work for him was *Leaves of Grass*, shown in 2012 at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, likely the world's most prestigious art exhibition. It was built of 16,000 images clipped from LIFE magazine from 1935 to 1985.

Each image was fixed to a piece of grass and then clustered chronologically on a tabletop, so it quivered slightly in the wake of each passerby. The piece was an overwhelmingly dense cascade of visual information but, at the same time, had an alarming physical presence. It almost dared viewers to make sense of it. Inevitably, the viewer would be hooked by glimmers of recognition but ultimately lost in the flood.

The piece was a plain-spoken metaphor for the constant flow of information that sweeps past us daily; by giving it material form, Farmer made a game but ultimately futile attempt to moor it to the

ground. Modernism, as practised by Moore, was nothing if not that: during and after the Second World War, he became almost a paternal figure in the U.K., crafting works of stiff-upper-lipped nationalism: mothers and children, reclining figures of women conveying a serenity amid the tumult.

Moore, in this imagining, was a grounding force for a nation badly in need of something solid to stand on. While that hardly accounts for the artist's entire career, it became his hallmark, so deepening the understanding of his work has become a natural recent mini-oeuvre at the AGO. Brian Jungen, for his own Iskowitz show, set up in the Sculpture Centre with his own version of primal works in 2011, and the gallery's Bacon Moore show pairs the visceral painting of Francis Bacon with the sculptor's work, unpacking from Moore a world of infrequently seen pain.

Into this, Farmer inserts his own dizzying view and his tendencies freshen the experience of Moore's works, and the space they inhabit, in a way that's fresh, captivating and unique. Farmer's work, I think, is about the inescapable forces of constant change, and even as he reconstructs a historical arrangement of the Moore Centre, going so far as to mask off the archway that leads to the Frank-Gehry designed Galleria Italia, he acknowledges its futility. ("The Galleria triumphs as it needed to," he writes in an accompanying pamphlet, "a glass and wooden battleship that has blasted a cannonball into Moore's thinking.")

Over the bulwark of Moore's grounding high-Modernism, Farmer lets loose a wash of destabilizing light and sound, pulling them up by the roots and recasting Moore's works as ephemeral, fleeting things that shift and change by the moment. Like *Leaves of Grass*, it staggers the firm footing of history with a blast of the chaotic present and scatters it to the wind.

Farmer, on hand the other night, fretted that he hadn't yet crafted the work moment by moment as he had hoped. But as a visceral experience, it has an uncommon, haunting beauty. While that may not be quite enough for him, in its current form, *Every day* conjures up a truism, no less profound now than when a revolutionary named Karl Marx first coined it: all that is solid melts into air.