

GEOFFREY FARMER

By ROBERTA SMITH MARCH 10, 2011

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525 West 21st Street

Chelsea

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In his American gallery debut the Canadian artist Geoffrey Farmer seems fairly obsessed with the sculptural possibilities of photographs, which he explores by cutting images from magazines and lodging them in space using several charming methods. The show's opening gallery contains a large installation piece whose title — “Pulling Your Brains Out Through Your Nose” — refers to the method by which the dead are prepared for mummification. It consists of numerous clusters of three or four cutout images of various figures, faces, masks, artifacts and the occasional animal that have been taped together and then suspended on wires protruding from the wall. It is as if the cobbled-together figures of Surrealist exquisite-corpse drawings have been liberated from their pages and hung out to dry. (They often evoke the work of Nancy Spero, an interesting debt.)

The second gallery makes a wonderful, stagelike first impression, with a glade of 13 crudely improvised lampposts made from wood, metal and bare light bulbs. To these various cutout images, found objects and shelves have been affixed. The more disparate works in the final gallery include two in which the images are attached to chunks of foam, and, in the case of an impressive piece titled “Lost Dogs and Half-Eaten Apples,” stuck into pedestals of hand-shaped clay. The effect is Miróesque.

There is a definite poetry and magic to Mr. Farmer's work, which like that of Sara VanDerBeek and Goshka Macuga, seems bent on excavating existing images in order to fuse collage and assemblage into a fresh cultural commentary, a kind of post-postmodernism. But while Mr. Farmer's efforts are initially intriguing, their general arrangements can feel formulaic, even though the mode of presentation often remains more engaging than the specific images. There is not always enough incentive to look more closely.