

LOS ANGELES

Geoffrey Farmer

REDCAT

The stage is set and lights dimmed. Whenever you might have chosen to enter Geoffrey Farmer's complex theatrical environment *Let's Make the Water Turn Black*, 2011, the play had always already begun and you were late, again. Instead of actors, groups of various found objects and constructed props, magazine pictures, and mechanized sculptures, large and small, enacted the installation's protracted and looping drama on the sprawling light-gray platform that occupied the center of the darkened gallery.

Clustered in spotlight tableaux and dispersed according to far-reaching compositional schemes, sundry props colonized the stage—a potted plant made from paper; a stuffed pair of red-and-black striped socks; wine bottles (broken and intact); a tie-dyed shirt draped over an easel; speakers, boxes, bowlers, and top hats; a leafy tree branch with an



owl-shaped wind chime; a chair and a mat; Japanese wooden sandals; a lantern next to a basket of colored lightbulbs, a pile of sticks lit from within like a campfire, and a turntable bearing the Mothers of Invention's 1966 debut album, *Freak Out!* There were a multitude of details to consider. Meanwhile, several larger elements constituted this absurd theater's core cast of character-sculptures, from a mysteriously faceless, cloaked dandy figure and a squat Snuffleupagus creature with a cardboard trunk to the dynamic star of the show, a monolith of faux rock that Farmer modeled after Isamu Noguchi's stone sculpture *To the Issei*, 1983, a civic landmark located in a plaza some blocks away in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo. Luridly tinted blue, purple, and red by extreme astral lighting, the hunk stood erect and stolid, an idolatrous emblem of phallic hardness inanimate until its internal gears creaked and it began to lean, gradually tipping all the way over before jerking back to a vertical position moments later.

A stilted and syncopated kineticism of sporadically spazzing limbs and intermittently twitching bodies pervaded the entire setup, which was intricately wired with mechanized components and a circuit of colored lights embedded jewel-like onstage and hung from above. Meticulously choreographed, the programmed lighting synced with sequences of motorized actions and the varying decibel levels of a continuous sound track, injecting the scene with immersive sound effects, spare melodic passages, and monologuing voices that insinuated psychic and social drama. Hybridizing poetic verse and stage direction, the artist's accompanying program notes tersely codified the work's precise chronological progression of visual, sonic, and oblique narrative cues, introducing interwoven references to John Cage, Kathy Acker, Merce Cunningham, Aram Moshayedi (the exhibition's curator), and Frank Zappa (after whose 1968 song this installation was named), while making explicit Farmer's primary fascination here with the spare, off-kilter stylings of Kabuki theater.

Whatever elusive narrative tenuously connects Farmer's congregation of disparate players, it is too disjointed, elliptical, and obscure to be coherently parsed. Rather, attention gravitates toward the bewitching atmospheric conditions and charged trappings of staged performance, the lingering dreamlike sense that, as suggested in the play's voice-over narration, "a beautiful dramatization occurred." Tapping the simulacral vein of Duchamp's *Étant donnés* or theatricalized configurations by artists like Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Guy de Cointet, and William Leavitt, Farmer exquisitely realizes an elevated mode of rapturous reception both estranged from and magnetically attracted to the installation's concealed and unpredictable internal order, wherein everything seemingly unconnected is, in fact, recognized to be intimately in sync and fundamentally unified at an unseen core-level. Here pleasure resides, then, in the subtle dynamics of glowing and dimming lights—turn-ons and turnoffs—that register ebbs and flows of energy, instigating waves of dramatic tension both onstage and in the viewer. The room's calibrated darkness carries latent sexual possibility crystallized by the many homoerotic pictures clipped from flesh magazines and taped to the erogenous zones of objects populating the scenery. Kabuki, after all, has always been twinned with the sensual services of the brothel.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer