

Geoffrey Farmer was born in Vancouver in 1967. He studied at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and the San Francisco Institute of Art. Recent solo exhibitions include *Let's Make the Water Turn Black*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, and Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, London (all 2013); REDCAT, Los Angeles (2011); Walter Philips Gallery, Banff (2010); Museo Experimental El Eco, Mexico City (2010); Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, (2010). Recent group exhibitions include the Triennale der Kleinplastik, Stadt Fellbach (2013); *Puppet Show*, Eastside Projects, Birmingham (2013); dOCUMENTA (13) (2012); *Stage Presence*, SFMOMA, San Francisco (2012); *Tools for Conviviality*, Power Plant, Toronto; *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (2011); Istanbul Biennial (2011). Farmer recently realized a project entitled *The Intellection of Lady Spider House* at Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton. He is the recipient of this year's Gershon Iskowitz Prize and will have a retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2015.

Sarah Robayo Sheridan was formerly Director of Exhibitions & Publications at Mercer Union and will be joining the Power Plant as Curator of Exhibitions in 2014.

EVENTS

Carte Blanche Film Screening

Tuesday 28 October, 8PM
 Offsite at Cinecycle, 129 Spadina Avenue (Alley off the east side of Spadina between Richmond and Adelaide streets)
 FREE (space is limited) | Presented in collaboration with York University

A special evening of historical avant-garde 16mm films, including works by Bruce Conner and Arthur Lipsett, selected by Geoffrey Farmer to coincide with his exhibition. Artist in attendance. Visit www.mercerunion.org for the complete line up.

Exhibition Walkthrough

Friday 1 November, 6PM
 Exclusive to Mercer Union members

Members are invited to join for a private walk-through of the exhibition with Geoffrey Farmer prior to the public opening. Membership is the lifeblood of Mercer Union. Show your support by joining Mercer Union and enjoy the benefits of belonging to Toronto's leading artist-run centre. Visit www.mercerunion.org for details on our membership levels. To become a new member or to renew your support, please contact York Lethbridge at york@mercerunion.org



Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

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Exhibition Technician: Jon Sasaki
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Cover Image: Geoffrey Farmer, *Boneyard* (detail), 2013. *Cariatide Martyr*, Basilica di Sant' Ambrogio, 1100, Milano

Inside Image: Geoffrey Farmer, *Boneyard* (detail), 2013. *Scuola di Benedetto Antelami*, 1196 - 1216, Parma, baptistery.

Back Image: Geoffrey Farmer, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell*, 2013.

Computer generated algorithmic montage sequence. Commissioned by Barbican Art Gallery. Photo: Alessandro Quisi

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Conseil des Arts
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Geoffrey Farmer *A Light In The Moon*



1 November 2013–11 January 2014
 Opening Friday 1 November, 7 PM



50 YEARS OF ONTARIO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE ARTS
 50 ANS DE SOUTIEN DU GOUVERNEMENT DE L'ONTARIO AUX ARTS

Geoffrey Farmer

A Light in The Moon

Front and Back Galleries

In her 1977 book *On Photography* Susan Sontag pronounced “to collect photographs is to collect the world.”¹ This statement resonates with the work of Geoffrey Farmer who excavates multifarious cultural histories, from the life of Frank Zappa and his Mothers of Invention, photographs in *Life* magazine between 1935 and 1985, Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or Nabokov’s 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, to the figure of Aloysius Snuffleupagus from *Sesame Street*. Rather than existing in isolation these stories, or histories, are intertwined with social and political events, music, visual art, film and happenstance through atmospheric and multifaceted installations combining video, film, sculptural elements, found objects, and sound. The exhibitionary moment becomes a magical space to tackle larger themes of the dialectical relationship between reality and artifice, how we understand our existence, knowledge and power.

A Light in The Moon refers to Gertrude Stein’s 1914 poem which breaks from a possible ‘sensible decision’ to a litany of options, possibilities, excitements and creations. Often playful, Farmer’s work leads us to renegotiate how we look at objects, and the meanings they elicit. In gathering histories, stories, objects, sounds, and images through poetic and theatrical installations, Farmer prompts wonder and undermines and disrupts the very concept of categorization or an encyclopedia of the world in which we live. Underlining such ideas is the capacity for anything, an object or an artwork, to alter its role and significance alluding to continual transformation and the potential for change.

A Light in The Moon represents a milestone for Mercer Union’s commissioning series. We would like to acknowledge the relentless and generous support of our patrons in this endeavour.

—Georgina Jackson, Director of Exhibitions & Publications

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¹Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On Photography*. Anchor Books: New York, p.13.

A Light in The Moon

In 2011 Geoffrey Farmer was invited to make a project for Mercer Union, and the idea has been fomenting, shape-shifting and evolving through many incarnations since. This changeability exemplifies the liveliness of a space that works to the measure of the artist, entwining itself with the dynamics of production. In this spirit, the space is given over to the artist as a raw material. If this just-in-time approach to exhibition-making demands much scurrying about, I hope it remunerates by the unrehearsed energy of a trail still warm from the studio to the gallery.

Releasing artworks from the studio is the dilemma of exhibiting. I think here of Jay DeFeo who refused to show her mythic painting *The Rose* (1958-1966) in the “Sixteen Americans” exhibition at MoMA in 1959, in order to continue to work on it for a further seven years. Bruce Conner’s film *The White Rose* (1967) documents the architectural surgery that was required to excise the two-ton artwork from the second storey window of the artist’s apartment. The film is a moving portrait of the loss involved in loosening the work from its maker and place of making. Until it was exhumed in 1995 for acquisition by the Whitney Museum of American Art, *The Rose* had stood entombed behind a false wall in a conference room at the San Francisco Art Institute. It is an incidental detail that Farmer attended the school while *The Rose* lay dormant there, yet somehow the tale speaks to his own preoccupation with anima in his work. A consistent interest for Farmer is how to breathe life into display, how to counter the inertia of objects.

If gallery display tends to suspend artworks in limbo state, then Farmer’s approach troubles this stoppage. Indeed, the paper figures in his dOCUMENTA (13) piece *Leaves of Grass* (2012) did tremble so gently. In this exhibition, the computer-generated montage *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (2013) operates as a life force, setting a cadence to all the works on display. With images and sounds tagged by attributions both objective and personal, the content refuses to be fixed down. It constantly regenerates before us, effectively illuminating an expanding archive of Farmer’s interests, his own anarchic ways of classifying and sorting. For the occasion of this exhibition, the organism has taken on elements of its host environment, adding fragments of Toronto’s sound ecology to the inventory. The complexity of the algorithm driving the work with its myriad permutations means that what we are effectively blind to ever knowing its full contours.

The protagonist of the exhibition is *Boneyard* (2013), a population of sculptures clipped from the pages of a discarded art book and sprung to life as standalone figures. Contending directly with the funerary aspect of the gallery site as the gathering point for artworks once they leave the studio, *Boneyard* extends the afterlife of these reproduced objects, juxtaposing ancient figurative sculpture against modernist abstractions, cancelling claims to primacy under the leveling stroke of montage. The miniaturization of the originals humorously undermines claims of might or ascendancy. Despite being loosened from their source, the figures cannot completely escape their former print life—the cast of light captured by the camera remains on them, a shadow they cannot shake. To behold each one is also to contemplate the hours of dutiful and careful cutting. Unfolding this array into installation, Farmer decompresses, airs out, expands on the tighter density of the two-dimensional book form. The resulting scattering of parts represents time in a non-linear way, effectively exploding art historical progress, allowing disassociated parts to commingle into their own material logic.

Boneyard was born from a gesture of generosity—the gift of books salvaged by a fellow artist, Ted Rettig, and preserved for Farmer. Farmer signals this exchange through the inclusion of Rettig’s carving tools within the exhibition, creating some similitude between the practice of stone carving as the originating act behind the photographic renderings, and Farmer’s own process of extraction from the printed matter to create new forms. A conversation is thus initiated between the genesis of sculpture and the origin

and practice of photography. To Farmer, the marble favoured in classical sculpture is an optical device, a material employed for its refractive nature. Both marble and moon are rocks that borrow from the sun to form their own glow. This repurposing can be read as a metaphor for Farmer’s own practice, which often transforms source matter through similarly refractive methods.

The title of the exhibition is itself a scavenged source, pointing to a passage from Gertrude Stein’s prose poem *Tender Buttons* (1914):

A light in the moon the only light is on Sunday. What was the sensible decision. The sensible decision was that notwithstanding many declarations and more music, not even notwithstanding the choice and a torch and a collection, notwithstanding the celebrating hat and a vacation and even more noise than cutting, notwithstanding Europe and Asia and being overbearing, not even notwithstanding an elephant and a strict occasion, not even withstanding more cultivation and some seasoning, not even with drowning and with the ocean being encircling, not even with more likeness and any cloud, not even with terrific sacrifice of pedestrianism and a special resolution, not even more likely to be pleasing. The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain.

In these words a whole universe is described, if by exception. The echo of the word “notwithstanding” plows forward gathering more and more objects in its course, constituting its own collection in a linguistic equivalent to the use of negative space in the visual plane. This process of accrual resonates with Farmer’s own gathering and sorting of matter. In the Stein passage, the phrase “even more noise than cutting” could be appropriated as an interpretive guide to Farmer’s extraction process. In *Boneyard* the “noise” comes from the sweeping of debris from the dustbin of art history, the jostling images against one another in unsettling accumulation. Stein’s expression “the care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong” is one way of describing the idiosyncratic taxonomies in play in *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell*.

Clocks punctuate the exhibition to remind us of the action of time. In Farmer’s symbolic order, the clock is the face of the workday and thus implicated in the march of history. We may also read pathos in this face, the visage of an automaton pounding out the minutes with innerving exactitude. Hollis Frampton expresses his displeasure with this beat in the voiceover to his 1971 film (*nostalgia*): “I discarded the metronome eventually, after tolerating its syncopation for quite a while.” Farmer himself undermines the authority of the tick-tock, stretching time to a flow without strict pattern or origin point by constantly tinkering and retooling his work, to an extent that it is scarcely ever left to rest. In these choices, he shares the same struggle that DeFeo before him faced with *The Rose*, whose mass seems to announce an unwillingness to relent. Farmer also shows his reticence to stopping work, preferring to push back against time through the accrual of forms and ideas. We are privileged to present *A Light in the Moon* as a live echo chamber of these ongoing concerns.

—Sarah Robayo Sheridan

