

Geoffrey Farmer

The Last Two Million Years

A consistent preoccupation of Geoffrey Farmer's diverse practice is his interest in the dialectical relationship between reality and artifice, in particular the multiple meanings that might be elicited from the deconstruction and interpretation of a chosen text. Commencing with literary sources, art history, or personal observation, Farmer constantly undermines, questions and interrogates the paradox of our knowledge and the tenuous space between truth and fiction. Utilising a complex layering of references and materials, his unique work harnesses the intellectual rigour of 70s Conceptualism to which he applies a contemporary light-touch and wit.

In some work he has disrupted the accepted perimeters of what constitutes an exhibition or artwork by producing the work over the duration of the exhibition, or by destroying the work as part of its production. For example, a hole had to be made in the gallery roof to accommodate the construction of a parade float in *Every Surface in Some Way Decorated, Altered, or Changed Forever (Except the Float)* in 2004. As the title suggests, the work developed over a period of time, and was to eventually be paraded around the block and then buried in the parking lot behind the gallery. Although the float was never decorated, it was eventually buried by the obsessive accumulation of homemade masks, costumes, banners, and street posters that Farmer decorated the gallery with on a daily basis. The seminal earlier piece, *Hunchback Kit* (2000) is a constantly mutating and evolving work comprising numerous objects that relate either directly or interpretatively to Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* (translated into English as 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'). Video footage of actions or activities produced by the artist, found objects, drawings, sculptural works made by Farmer and scripts that have a correlation either to the original text or to the numerous re-interpretations of the story, are presented in a custom-made 13 ft tall crate. At each venue a new work is made in response to a dialogue between curator and artist, as well as additional materials and artefacts added that are specific to the venue or location of display. In this work Farmer sets up a system, an archive of sorts, that uses the narrative vicariously as a conceptual template in order to explore a variety of ideas, such as the notion of an authorial, static museum display.

Farmer's most ambitious project to date, *A Pale Fire Freedom Machine*, presented at The Power Plant, Toronto in 2005, brought together a careful staging of disparate references and associations, centred around Vladimir's Nabakov's 1962 novel 'Pale Fire', in which a poet and an academic battle it out over questions of authorship and history. Throughout the course of the exhibition, discarded second hand furniture was systematically broken up and burnt in an iconic modernist fireplace designed by Dominique Imbert in 1968 with the resulting soot used to make posters. Just as Nabakov's novel critically examines themes of translation and artistic appropriation, the physical objects and intellectual associations that were initially set up and continued to accumulate throughout the course of the exhibition were processed, both literally and conceptually, to create a work in a constant state of flux.

The new body of work made for Farmer's first European solo exhibition at The Drawing Room takes as its starting point a book found lying on the street titled 'The Last Two Million Years'. Published by Readers Digest, the encyclopaedia presents a description of the evolution of the earth leading up to the appearance of 'Homo sapiens' and the subsequent history of man from this time, as set out in the books' introduction:

*Humanity has lived on the earth for more than 2 million years, hardly more than the blinking of an eye in relation to the earth's total history, which stretches back for the almost inconceivable span of 4700 millions years. If the age of the earth from its origin to the present time is imagined as equivalent to a single day, then humans appeared less than a minute from midnight at the day's end. Yet the story of this great abyss of time before human's arrival is also part of our heritage.*

The idea of one book covering such a vast sweep of history seems oddly conceptual, if not faintly ridiculous, especially at a time when unprecedented amounts of knowledge can be consumed instantaneously and without hierarchy (or proof of authenticity) through the internet. Yet the existence of this publication reminds us that the act of buying a book is also symbolic of owning knowledge, an idea that is reinforced by its faux marble cover and a serif title font, which is a clear attempt to associate itself with the authority of classicism. Farmer comments, "It also has connotations of a stone container, a sarcophagus which could imply that history itself partially resides in the world of the dead, and that in the act of historicizing is also an act of acknowledging a type of reflective gaze from the living."

Within the exhibition Farmer opens up a fantastical reading for specific images by presenting them with alternative titles that effectively counter the didactic summary of a historic period or event they originally served to illustrate. For example, in the book the desert scene reproduced on this poster accompanies an account of Moses leading the Jewish people out of slavery and is re-titled here as *A Whale Struggles in the Rough Seas (The Sinai Peninsula, page 80-81, The Last Two Million Years,)* indicating an image that Farmer claims to see represented in the rocky landscape. Overall this project breaks down, questions and personalises the categorisation of history as conceptualised in this book found strangely by coincidence. It uses the specificities of this chance starting point to tackle the larger themes of how we understand our existence in the world, how this is articulated through language and how this can have relevance to an individual.

Text by Katharine Stout