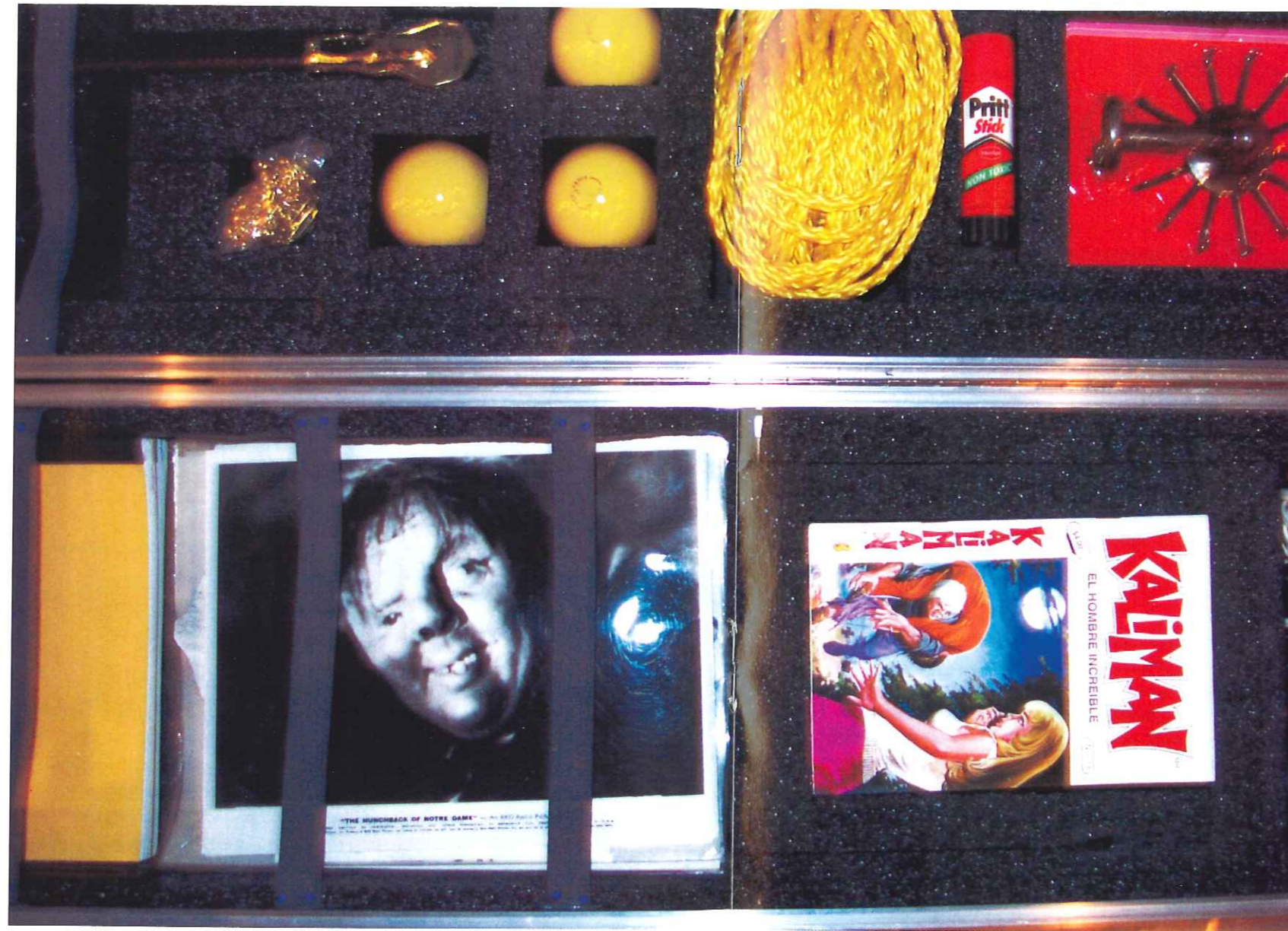


This series of essays on emerging Canadian artists is sponsored by THE FRASER ELLIOTT FOUNDATION in memory of BETTY ANN ELLIOTT

[ Spotlight ]



# Hunchback Modern

The art of Geoffrey Farmer

By Reid Shier

FAR LEFT: Robe from *Hunchback Kit* 2000  
Photo Kyla Mallett Courtesy Catriona  
Jeffries Gallery

ABOVE: *Hunchback Kit (detail)* 2000  
Crate, lights, electrical cords, drawings,  
research documents, monitor, VCR, videos  
Dimensions variable

"...the poor unfortunate had become accustomed to seeing nothing of the world beyond the religious walls which had received him into their shadow. Notre-Dame had been successively as he grew and developed, his egg, his nest, his home, his country, his universe."

VICTOR HUGO, *Notre-Dame de Paris*

"Vancouver is to [sic] close to the sea and all kind of people coming from all over the world with dope. I'm glad it's cold here it keeps all those..."

EXCERPT FROM FOUND LETTER INCLUDED IN *Hunchback Kit*

WHEN GEOFFREY FARMER was invited to participate in the exhibition "6: New Vancouver Modern" in 1998, one of his ideas, later abandoned, was to contribute a video that would be shot from a helicopter as it flew from the Capilano Reservoir to the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at UBC. For anyone familiar with Vancouver, this would take the viewer on a precipitous journey from the North Shore mountains and out across Burrard Inlet before cresting up the bluffs of Point Grey and on to the site of the exhibition on the university campus above. From a sweeping panorama of the city skyline to a tight close-up on the viewer's location at the gallery, Farmer would foreground Vancouver's internationally marketed image by returning the viewer to the place where he or she stands. Though unrealized, the idea is a starting point for understanding Farmer's subsequent work.

"6" was organized by the Belkin to certify a new generation of Vancouver artists with wider public attention. The exhibition, curated by Scott Watson, proposed that each participating artist had an "important relation to modernism" and looked to internationally defined models for making art. The perspective of internationalism was set against the regional navel-gazing that is as familiar in Vancouver as it is in any geographically isolated and nationally marginal city, with the purpose of redefining and re-envisioning issues of local concern. The artists in "6"—Farmer, Myfanwy MacLeod, Steven Shearer, Ron Terada, Kelly Wood and Damian Moppett—taking their cues from Los Angeles and London, imagined new perspectives on what it meant to live in Vancouver while establishing a place in the international artworld.

Vancouverites are used to seeing their city on television and in movies, but because our reflection is usually of another, typically American, city, a paradoxical fascination has emerged with the city's ubiquitous invisibility. Recent local bleating that we've been ignored on the national political stage is, in light of our recurring TV image, ironic. Watson suggested with "6" that Vancouver's political and cultural regionalism has spawned desires for an "illusion that helped people turn away from reality..." In Vancouver, this has a televisual flip side. Moshe Safdie's debacle of a library, for instance, makes a lot more architectural sense as Robert Duvall's futuristic-looking lab in *The Sixth Day* than it does as a local landmark. It's an example of how effortlessly Vancouverites are given evocative revisualizations of their city. That





LEFT: *How to make a gargoyle*  
Video still from *Hunchback Kit* 2000

OPPOSITE: *and finally the street becomes the main character*  
Video still from *Hunchback Kit* 2000

this allows a certain lack of cultural effort on the home front shouldn't come as a surprise, as it brings into focus how our representational invisibility provides both a regional (political) and an international (visual) identity.

Farmer's abandoned "Magnum P.I." helicopter sequence was one of a rapidly multiplying number of ideas for works, and in retrospect this accretion was symptomatic of efforts now emblematic of his working method. He mines a passion for research, collection, archiving and display, while developing almost contradictory methods of accessioning and dispersing these interests. It's a process of accumulation and divestment that bridges spaces between conflicting systems while enrolling others in the responsibility for the craft and growth of his pieces. Farmer has developed a method of making the social guy wires behind the infrastructures of curation and display visible, while engendering ongoing relationships with the institutions, galleries, curators and markets that he works with and which frame him. His most recent piece, *Hunchback Kit* (2000), reiterates questions posed over three years ago at the Belkin. Opened to investigation and display, it is also a Pandora's box of descriptive possibilities.

The contents of *Kit* are enclosed in an unusually tall, oddly

narrow shipping container, similar to crates the film industry uses to store expensive camera equipment. Rather than containing anything of apparent value, *Kit* houses an archive of modest objects, from videocassettes to items so meagre and fragile their existence seems negligible, intact only by virtue of their selection. There's a crude snowflake cut from an invitation to a gallery opening in Mexico City and pieces of rope collected from different countries. There are also seven do-it-yourself videotapes relating to theatre: on how to apply theatrical make-up, on how to sword fight, and so on, including three produced by Farmer himself. There's a blue light bulb. The list goes on, ranging from concrete cultural documentation to abject refuse. None of it coalesces with any particular logic. The items seem collected by some cargo cult of cultural anthropology and a first impression can be intimidating and confusing. The content's lack of distinction is opposed to the reverence the crate requests on its behalf.

Almost all the objects, however, have some oblique reference to Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), and some of these might be used in a low-rent adaptation of a play or performance based on the novel. The snowflake could be one of Notre-Dame's stained-glass rose windows. The ropes: tools of the bell ringer, or

**This accident encapsulates the tensions in Farmer's practice between the heroic and the ordinary, between luminosity and opaqueness, and between value and garbage.**

for Esmeralda to swing on (in escape or punishment). Two wax earplugs are inscribed with the words "may your soul shine as bright as one thousand suns." Other objects refer to research into the numerous screen adaptations of the novel over the past 75 years. A binder is full of information downloaded off the internet about Lon Chaney, who played Quasimodo in the 1923 film. There is also a teacher's guide to screening the 1996 Disney version, along with material on topics ranging from the plight of the gypsies, Gothic Revival and Victor Hugo to the cathedral itself.

Only some of the objects are displayed during a given exhibition of the work. While out of their crate, they are replaced by styrofoam blanks cut in their ghostly shape. The work includes a curatorial manual that outlines possibilities for various ways the objects can be installed. The light bulb, for instance, was strung in the skylight of the Catriona Jeffries Gallery during the *Kit*'s first showing and turned on only at night, as if it were a little moon. Another light bulb, on the end of a homemade walking staff, was propped against a wall and framed by hundreds of dressmaker's pins in the shape of a glowing halo. This use of light is representative of Farmer's material sensitivity, and arises in part from references to pedestrian cinematic methods of creating realistic or fantastical effects. The shimmering light reflecting off the pinheads pressed into the wall acts out a dramatically beautiful idea of star-like radiance while lighting almost nothing.

Also at Catriona Jeffries, painted on the front window in matte acrylic black, was a big black Robert Motherwell-like blob, titled *Grisaille*. The day after the paint was applied it absorbed so much heat from the sun that it cracked the window, so loudly it could be heard in the gallery's lower floor. This accident encapsulates the tensions in Farmer's practice between the heroic and the ordinary, between luminosity and opaqueness, and between value and garbage. The term *grisaille* refers to grey monochrome renderings used to simulate the illusion of sculptural dimension, a technique sometimes used in medieval stained glass. Farmer introduced it as a referent to the windows in Notre-Dame, which were designed not only to illuminate the cathedral but also to author light that could effect religious awe. Farmer's modernist acrylic blob obscured the gallery window with the painting of a window and proved so effective in absorbing light that it destroyed its transparent "canvas" with a godlike thunderclap.

During the *Kit*'s second installation, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Farmer replaced some photographs in director Matthew Teitelbaum's office with six rubber Hunchback masks. Only visitors to the administrative heart of the AGO could see this part of the exhibition. The emblematically modernist styrofoam blanks were piled on the gallery floor like a cairn of miniature Henry Moores. Of the three self-produced videos, two were made to accompany this exhibition, and Farmer will continue to add to the *Kit* with other videos and material as it is shown. One video titled *and finally the street becomes the main character* was shot from one of the AGO's windows and screened on a monitor posi-



tioned where the camera had been. In it, Farmer walks a circle around a planter in a public square across the street. During his initial pass he sprinkled cornflakes from a bag onto the pavement, subsequently walking over the cereal with a foam shoe duct-taped to his right foot. Inside the shoe was a microphone, which recorded the crunching sound of his limping clubfoot as he marched penitently around the planter. The videotape continues after Farmer completes the performance, and shows the circle disappearing as a bunch of pigeons peck at the remains.

The Vancouver Art Gallery recently purchased *Hunchback Kit* and Farmer and I spent time in the gallery's vault photographing the images that accompany this text. While at the VAG, some of the staff questioned the artist about the extra material that had been added at the AGO, and which now needed cataloguing upon the work's return. In the very bowels of the institution, near thousands of pieces of art that see the light of day only on curatorial day passes, this negotiation seemed at the heart of the piece. Victor Hugo's novel, situated at the vanguard of Romanticism, was written with the desire to preserve Notre-Dame from demolition in an industrializing Paris convulsed by a desire for the new. The book's fascination with the cathedral's gargoyles, including its hideous living inhabitant, mirrors the romantic impulse in Farmer's own work and a palpable longing for the lost and abandoned. Through the cut-outs, ghostly absences and shifts in proportion found everywhere within it, *Hunchback Kit* echoes an allegiance to the marginal and to that which is erased in the erection of new paradigms.

By negotiating entry to the architecturally and psychically hidden parts of the museum, both inside and out, Farmer has formulated a method of uncovering what is hidden and elided. Three years ago, this included an assertion that the Belkin gallery was not an international gallery, but one situated on the campus of the University of British Columbia, in the city of Vancouver. With *Hunchback Kit* Farmer continues to assemble an expanding inquiry into what is shrouded in the guise of visibility—into the darkness of galleries at night and the objects stored in the basement—and into what is repressed, denied and remade that the new might thrive. ■