

IN THE
STUDIO



SPENCER FINCH

Using materials such as the light tubes shown above, Spencer Finch gives material form to elemental conditions and fleeting moments. Right: Colored theatrical gels, which are often used in his small- and large-scale pieces, rest on a table in his Brooklyn studio. Opposite: Finch making adjustments to a mock-up of a light-filtering installation.





OPERATING AT THE INTERSECTION OF SCIENCE AND POETRY, THIS NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST RE-CREATES EPHEMERAL SENSORY EXPERIENCES.

BY MEGHAN DAILEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA CORSON

SPENCER FINCH stands next to a large table in his Brooklyn studio and sorts through some paintings on paper that have just been returned to him after a show at Dundee Contemporary Arts, a museum in Scotland. Each thick, rectangular sheet is covered with about 300 drops of watercolor paint in different blue hues. He explains that these panels, scattered with constellations of fuzzy-edged circles, compose *8,456 Shades of Blue (After Hume)*, a work inspired by a passage from a text by David Hume in which the 18th-century Scottish philosopher and empiricist considers sensory perception and various shades of blue. “This is probably the only artwork made about him,” says Finch with a slight laugh. It is not surprising that this artist, whose subtle work plays with the imprecise nature of perception, is drawn to Hume, who theorized that all knowledge originates in experience.

Finch, 46, often focuses on the elemental—the weather, the cosmos, water and light (the memorable title of his 2007 retrospective at Mass MOCA was “What Time Is It on the Sun?”). He captures these natural phenomena and his firsthand experience of them in photographs, paintings and drawings, as well as in installations of colored glass or fluorescent-light tubes. Most of Finch’s works begin with direct observations made during

his travels. For example, to produce *West (Sunset in My Motel Room, Monument Valley, February 26, 2007, 5:36–6:06 p.m.)*, 2007, he measured the intensity of the daylight in the desert as it gradually faded over a half hour. In the piece, nine video monitors, viewed from the back, play a selection of stills from *The Searchers*, the famous 1956 Western that John Ford shot in Monument Valley. The illumination from the monitors, which hits the wall in front of them, is meant to replicate the February twilight as Finch experienced it. Although he starts with hard data, he acknowledges that with such elusive subject matter, the results are highly subjective.

The sensibility his work conveys is one of modesty combined with forceful intelligence, and that’s a bit how Finch himself comes across. When I visit his spacious studio on the second floor of a former box factory adjacent to the Gowanus Canal, he is gracious though a bit wary of my presence. On this day, not long before the opening of the Venice Biennale, where Finch has three works, there is steady activity. His studio manager is on the telephone with a European museum discussing the technical specifications required to install a work, and I’m told a collector will be stopping by later for a visit. Finch shows me a model of

the Milky Way he made of ordinary metal cans that he's wired to light up. "It's like a river in the night sky," says Finch, turning off the overhead lights and plugging in his lo-tech galaxy. Tiny beams shoot through holes in the bottoms of the cans, and above, the ceiling is gently illuminated. The effect, in the half daylight of his white-walled studio, is an approximation, but the measurements used in its creation are exact. The size of each can, Finch explains, is determined by the absolute magnitude of the star represented—how big it really is—and the size of each hole is determined by the star's visible magnitude, or how big it appears to us on earth. "The work has to be about something, otherwise it's just abstract," he says. "It has to have a connection to the world."

Often that connection is literary. An especially lyrical installation, *Sunlight in an Empty Room* (*Passing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 28, 2004*), sets fluorescent lights behind a "cloud" of crumpled sheets of blue theatrical gel, held together with clothespins and suspended from the ceiling, to re-create the light at the moment a cloud passed the day Finch visited the house in western Massachusetts where the reclusive poet spent her life.

Finch, who was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, professes a deep attachment to the literature and landscape of New England. "My parents have a place in Vermont that used to be my grandparents'. Last summer I was there, helping my mom garden. I was digging the dirt, and the dirt there, which I remember since I was a child, has a smell that's different than anywhere else. It was incredibly poignant," he recalls.

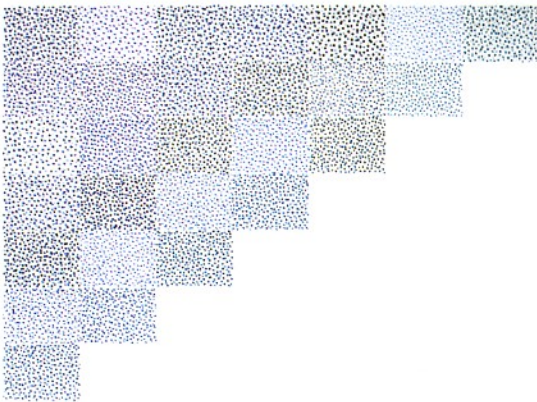
Finch studied comparative literature at Hamilton College, in upstate New York, and spent an academic year in Japan working with a potter. He took a few art classes when he returned to Hamilton and, a few years after graduating, applied to the ceramics program at the Rhode Island School of Design. "I got into RISD not because of my work

but because of [my] essay," he says. "Clay people are not very articulate, so I think my essay sort of surprised [the admissions committee]." Once there, Finch began experimenting with mediums that were new to him, like video. The faculty was not pleased. "After a year, they tried to kick me out," he says. »



Dream 3/10/02 vest (Bob Dylan in skyscraper)

Clockwise from top: *102 Colors From My Dreams*, 2002 (detail); the 2004 work *Night Sky (Over the Painted Desert, Arizona, January 11, 2004)*; Finch in his studio; and *8,456 Shades of Blue (After Hume)*, 2008, which Finch made in tribute to the philosopher David Hume.



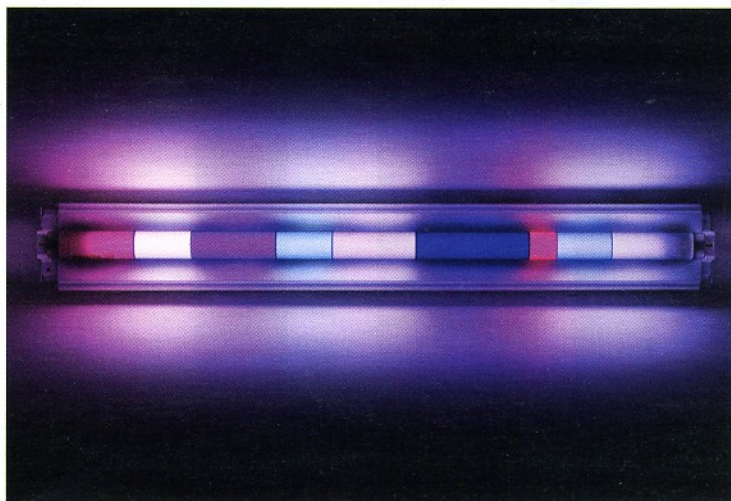
Finch reapplied, to the sculpture department, which accepted him largely, he notes, because his fellow students then “had the majority of the votes” regarding admissions decisions.

Now, as at school, he resists restriction. He is currently collaborating on a project with the dancer and choreographer William Forsythe that will open in Frankfurt in December. In October, Finch will show at Postmasters, his longtime New York gallery, and a spring exhibition at Yvon Lambert in Paris is in the works (he is also represented by Lisson in London, Rhona Hoffman in Chicago and Nordenhake in Berlin).

Typically his works relate to the site where they will be shown. *The River that Flows Both Ways*, an installation on the High Line, the elevated park on the West Side of Manhattan, references the adjacent Hudson River. To create this public project, his first in New York, Finch floated in a tugboat, propelled only by the Hudson’s current, for more than 11 hours, all the while taking 700 photographs of the water’s surface. The gradations in color he captured were translated into colored film ranging in hue from greenish blue, pale aqua and milky lilac to darker purples and almost black. The film was then laminated onto 700 panes of glass, which Finch used to replace a series of windows in a former loading dock. The monumental piece—mea-

suring more than 134 feet long—will remain on view near the park’s 16th Street entrance through early next summer.

Finch is content to be back in the studio. He’s at work on a group of drawings based on his observations of a river in New Zealand. He took photographs, he says, but it’s important to know that the colors he will use will be based on observation and that they are accurate. If the gently wavy lines of color don’t look like water in the literal sense, they do represent it in a way that can be scientifically verified. “These are conventional pictures—landscapes and seascapes—but I’m trying to approach them indirectly. An honest picture has to be aware of itself,” he says, “and the hardest thing in the world is to make an honest picture.” ■



Most of Finch’s work begins with direct observation. Shown, clockwise from top, are *Moonlight* (Luna County New Mexico, July 13, 2003), 2005; *The River that Flows Both Ways*, 2009; *2 Hours, 2 Minutes, 2 Seconds* (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007), 2007; and *Sunlight in an Empty Room* (Passing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 28, 2004), 2004.

