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SPENCER FINCH

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The Finch Effect

BY STEPHANIE CASH



Spencer Finch's deceptively minimalist works, stripped-down in appearance but not in content, are poetic in both the literal sense—he has referenced Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau, among others—and the metaphorical, evocative sense. It's not surprising, since the 45-year-old artist has a BA in comparative literature from Hamilton College and an MFA in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design. In his mixed-medium sculptures, drawings and installations, he often deals with perception and memory, most notably in attempts to re-create a single, sensory element—often the particular quality of light or color in a place with cultural or historical resonance. Sometimes his

works originate with a location or subject that inspires him and he then struggles to find the right mode of expression, and sometimes he has a mind a visual form or idea and works backward to find appropriate subject matter. He endeavors to simulate the subtle, often ephemeral background effects—the color of fog or the light of a sunset—that contribute to our overall impression of a place, but that aren't readily conveyed in photographs.

Finch's methods have yielded a surprisingly diverse and evolving body of work; he continually finds new ways to translate the ineffable into physical form, though he frequently revisits tried-and-true formats and

Since the early 1990s, Spencer Finch has made diverse minimalist works dealing with color, light and perception. A midcareer survey, layered with historic and literary references, is currently on view at Mass MoCA.



phenomena. In the mid-'90s he became well-known for monochromatic works, often drawings, that depict color effects under varying lighting conditions. His works became more experiential for the viewer in the early 2000s, with wall-hung pieces and room-size installations using fluorescent light tubes as well as colored-glass or light-filtering window installations. More recently he has been adding increasingly complex and convoluted layers of meaning to devise works that are allusive without being imitative. All along he has experimented with whatever processes or methods, such as photography and video, that best convey his ideas.

Finch's works are captivating not only because he accurately re-

creates a sensual moment or visual phenomenon, but because of the heroic effort he expends in trying to capture what is elusive and intangible. The results range from humorous to poignant, often at the same time, and raise questions about perception and reality. Anyone familiar with the film *Rashomon* or who has been in psychotherapy knows that perception—one's experience of truth—and objective reality are slippery, sometimes irreconcilable things.

View of Spencer Finch's CIE 529/418 (candlelight), 2007, sandblasted glass; at Mass MoCA. All photos this article Luke Stettner.

West, a rare video work, simulates a sunset using light bouncing off the wall from TVs, which feature stills from John Ford's film *The Searchers*.

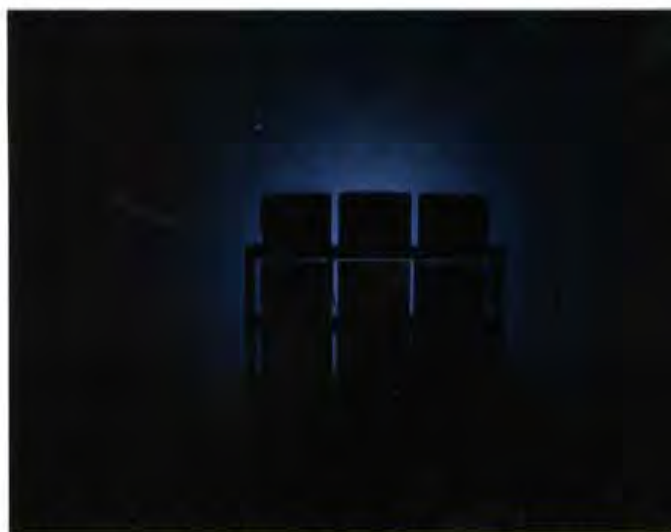
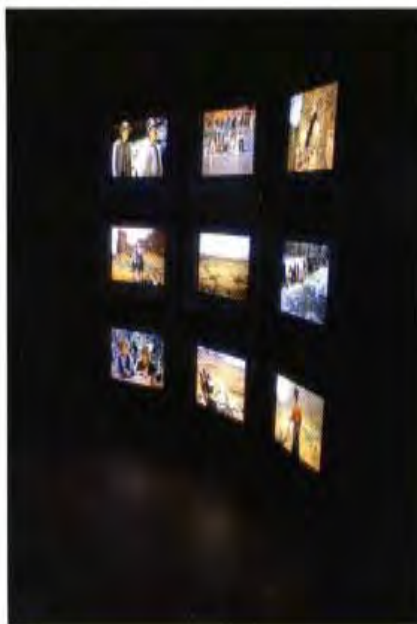
Some of Finch's projects start out as exactly as possible, as when he uses such scientific instruments as a colorimeter, a device that measures the color of light. And some are approximations, occasionally recalled from memory, of fleeting phenomena that cannot be directly observed or measured, such as the visual distortion caused by a self-inflicted *Poke in the Eye (right eye, outside edge, light pressure)*, 1997, rendered as two colorful, haloed circles on paper. Despite his best efforts, Finch remains acutely aware of the ultimate failure of his "experiments" to depict his elusive subjects.

Just as Robert Ryman has said that his white paintings are not abstractions because they represent what they *are*, Finch, as a sort of conceptual minimalist, maintains that his works are not abstractions because they purportedly represent *something*, such as a black square of darkness or a gray oval of ceiling. (Viewers are tipped off by descriptive titles and checklist explanations.) Yet even when his works are "representational," it is because Finch has chosen subjects that are monochromatic, minimalist and inherently "abstract."

Finch's current midcareer survey at Mass MoCA, curated by Susan Cross, features work produced since 1993 and two new site-specific projects. Instead of providing a linear progression of the artist's development, the show's installation relies on either thematic or visual connections (sometimes loose) between works. As a result, sometimes other, perhaps unintended, connections can also be found. The show's title, "What Time Is It on the Sun?," comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and underscores the importance of the sun—ergo light, vision and perception—in Finch's work. It also suggests his quixotic search for things imperceptible and unanswerable.

The survey follows on the heels of his recent exhibition—titled "A Certain Slant of Light" after an Emily Dickinson poem—at New York's Postmasters gallery, where Finch has shown since 1994, and includes two pieces from that show. *Two hours, Two minutes, Two seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007)* is a semicircular arrangement of 44 computer-controlled box fans stacked four high. For about two hours the fans periodically create a gentle, intermittent breeze from various directions and at varying speeds, determined by Finch's measurements using a digital anemometer and weathervane while standing on the shore of Walden Pond, where Thoreau spent two years, two months and two days. Viewers standing at the work's center can experience the approximate breeze that Finch, and presumably Thoreau, did.

At Postmasters, the work was displayed along with *Walden Pond (morning effect, March 13, 2007)*, a wall collage comprising 139 reproductions, arranged in the shape of the pond, of



This page, West (Sunset in my motel room, Monument Valley, January 26 2007, 5:36-6:06 PM), 2007, 9-channel synchronized video installation with 9 monitors, approx. 31 minutes, shelving: 81 by 72 by 29 inches.

aneous paintings by Monet. From 20 spots around the pond's perimeter, Finch noted the hues of the water and ice, then located their matches in the Monet reproductions. Each image bears a notation with an arrow pointing to the particular color, and the time, location on the shore and direction he was facing. It's a rather complicated enterprise, and visually and intellectually engaging, but atypically for Finch, it doesn't present a coherent, unified effect. Viewers are challenged to mentally reconstruct the myriad tidbits scattered around the composition to imagine what he might've been seeing.

Tucked into a back gallery at Mass MoCA, and too easily missed, is a new video piece—a rare medium for Finch. Visitors entering the room might only see a darkened gallery with the faint silhouette of TV sets—a grid of nine placed a few feet from and facing the wall—and apparently not much happening (even at Postmasters, where the work was also in a back room, impatient viewers who entered at the “wrong” moment quickly turned and exited). But, in its simulation of a sunset, the work, titled *West*

(*Sunset in My Motel Room, Monument Valley, January 26, 2007, 5:36-6:06 PM*), slowly reveals itself. Using the light bouncing off the wall from the TVs, which feature stills from John Ford's 1956 epic *The Searchers*, the 31-minute loop begins brightly before gradually dimming to near darkness. While in Monument Valley, where *The Searchers* was filmed, Finch used a colorimeter to measure, once a minute for half an hour, the fading light against a white wall in his motel room. To re-create the effect, he selected scenes from the film—from sunny outdoor shots to interior and nighttime scenes—and configured them to appear on various monitors, the scenes rotating among the monitors and becoming progressively darker until all but one of the screens goes black.

Finch's works frequently seem to be purely visual exercises, and it is his hope that they stand alone as abstractions,¹ but of course it's never that simple. One wall at Mass MoCA is filled with a salon-style hanging of 102 framed drawings, each bearing a colorful shape resembling a Rorschach blot. Titled *102 Colors from My Dreams* (2002), it is the result of Finch describing in a bedside diary colors that appeared in his dreams, for example, “red of the checkerboard of those gas tanks in Queens they exploded.”² He later mixed inks to achieve the colors and made ink blots. The piece is a witty linking of an unconscious expression and a famous, if controversial, psychological test devised to interpret unconscious associations.

Abecedarly (Nabokov's Theory of a Colored Alphabet Applied to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle), 2004, is a field of 9,251 brightly colored ink splotches on a mural-size expanse of paper. As the novelist described in his memoir, he experienced the rare phenomenon of synesthesia, the fusing of two or more senses, in his case associating colors with letters.³ Using Nabokov's color alphabet, Finch transliterated an excerpt from German physicist Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle on subatomic particles, which describes the impossibility of accurately measuring their position and momentum at the same time. While the letters of the text are all represented here, their arrangement is random, thwarting any possible deciphering and leaving its veracity “uncertain.”

Similarly coded and several times removed from its source is *Night Sky (Over the Painted Desert, Arizona, January 11, 2004)*, an elaborate chandelier of 401 variously sized incandescent lightbulbs. While many of Finch's other light-based works attempt to duplicate the exact light or color of a specific place, *Night Sky* is essentially an illuminated molecular model of color derived from a complex formula. Finch first matched the color of the Arizona night sky using four pigments, then weighed them and calculated their proportional molecular ratios. Each lightbulb represents a particular atom in those structures, not the twinkling stars and constellations suggested by the title.

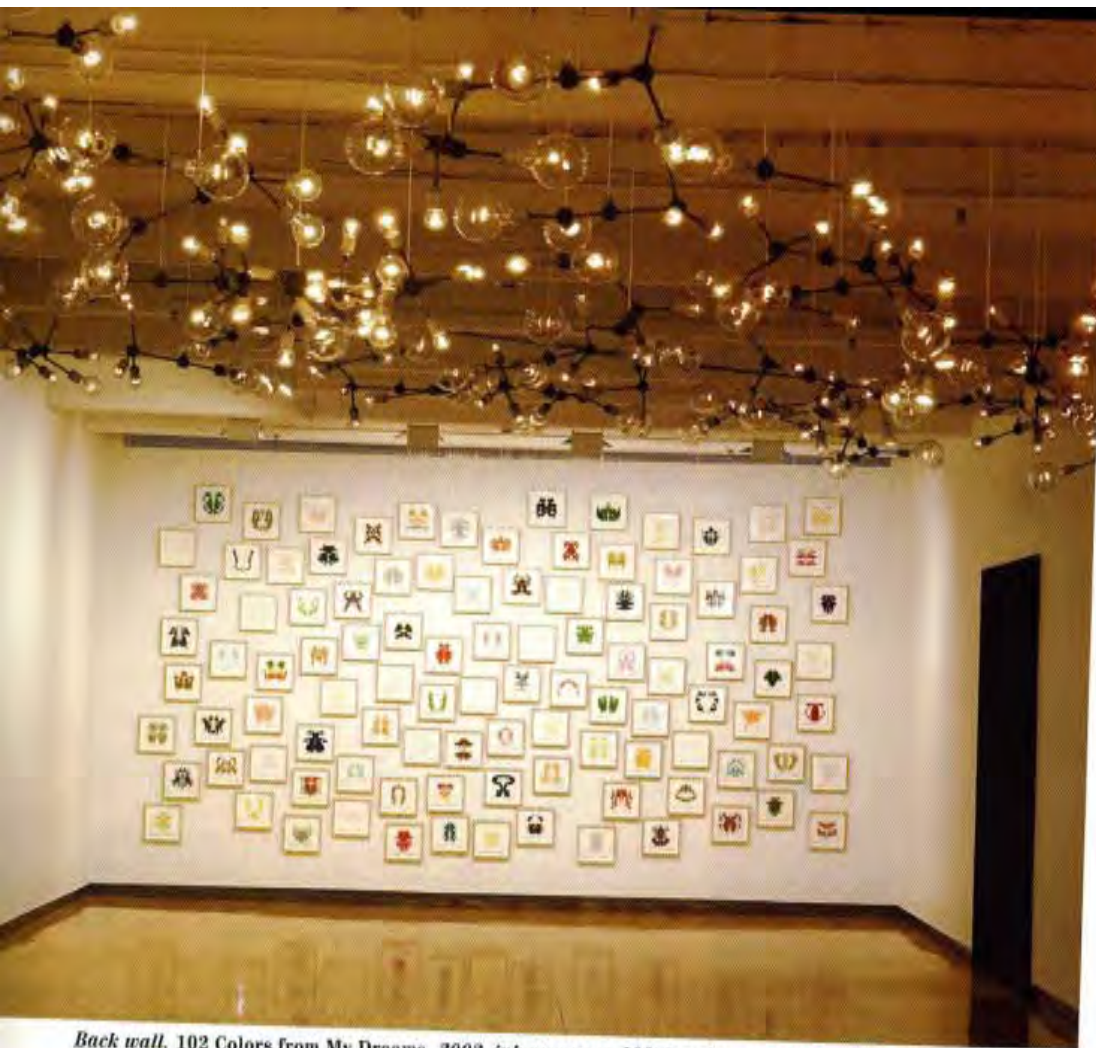
Resembling an amateur science project, an early installation that also looks to the cosmos, *Blue (One second brainwave transmitted to the star Rigel)*, 1993, comprises



Two hours, Two minutes, Two seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007), 2007, 44 fans, wood, computerized dimmer board, approx. 8 feet tall. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York.

Walden Pond (morning effect, March 13, 2007), 2007, collage, 50 by 138 inches. Courtesy Postmasters.





Back wall, 102 Colors from My Dreams, 2002, ink on paper; 102 drawings, each 9 inches square; Cartin Collection, Hartford. On ceiling, Night Sky (Over the Painted Desert, Arizona, January 11, 2004), 2004, 85 light fixtures and 401 incandescent lamps; collection Phillip and Tracey Riese.

a tattered orange armchair, a TV set, an old Apple computer, electrodes, an antenna and a tripod-mounted transmitter. Using these jury-rigged components, Finch recorded his brain wave for one second as he watched the huge blue wave in the opening sequence of the 1970s TV show "Hawaii Five-O," a still of which appears on the TV screen. His brain wave was then translated by the software and projected into space by the transmitter. It should reach its destination, the bluest star in our sky, in the year 2956. With the "real" work supposedly somewhere in the cosmos, modern-day viewers are left with a scrappy installation that belies the beauty of the concept.

Most of Finch's work, however, aspires to formal as well as conceptual beauty. And sometimes its formal simplicity reveals unexpected, emotionally loaded content buried within. A gallery at Mass MoCA is lined with 100 small drawings from 1994 of pretty pink spots, none the same shade, the result of his project to try, 100 different times, to re-create from memory the shade of pink of Jackie Kennedy's pillbox hat. It seems a trifling affair, until one realizes that it's the hat she was wearing on the day of her husband's assassination. A somber inflection can also be found in a 1998 series of monochromatic mosaics made of slightly varying shades of pale gray tiles on panel. In this case, the works are representational, based on archival photographs taken on various mountaintops—K2, Mt. Everest, etc.—during an avalanche, snowstorm or other whiteout conditions that led to the deaths of climbers.

Blue (Sky Over Cape Canaveral, August 31, 1994, 10:25 AM) features a homemade siting device, which Finch used, along with NASA coordinates, to isolate a square kilometer of blue sky—the midair loca-

tion where the Challenger shuttle exploded in 1986. Finch mixed the colors in acrylic paint on-site to match the sky. The device is on view in the gallery along with a 3-centimeter blue square—the size of the device's aperture—painted directly on the nearby wall. The minuscule square is a monument in its own humble way, as if emphasizing the event's physical and, now, emotional distance. One wonders if Finch will tackle 9/11 in the not-too-distant future.

In 1994, Finch created a series of drawings in pastel while visiting Freud's Viennese home, now a museum, where he recorded throughout the day the color of the ceiling above the psychoanalyst's couch, the supine patient's view. Three subsequent frescoes on 5-foot-wide oval panels, based on the drawings, were included in an exhibition that year at Postmasters. Having written about the show,⁴ I was surprised to see here four smaller ovals on paper from the same project looking quite gray and not the decidedly pinkish hue I remembered the frescoes to be. Certainly, I thought, the discrepancy was due to the different medium or a different part of the ceiling. To my dismay, a look back at those works and my words reveals that only one, the morning version, has hints of pink. It's a testament to Finch's overall project about the unreliability of perception and memory that my color recollection of these panels was so far off.

Finch traveled to Rouen in 1996 to capture the cathedral that had so inspired Monet, who has in turn inspired Finch in his descriptive titling style and his repeated studies of the same subject at different times of the day. On Finch's visit, however, the cathedral was covered in scaffolding, so he retreated to his hotel room across the street (he seems to spend a lot of time in his hotel rooms) and instead created a palette of the colors of objects in his room in the morning, afternoon and evening. Nothing more than three haphazard grids of patches of watercolor, the triptych "depicts" his hotel room. The color patches are labeled—doorknob, remote control, bedspread, bed lamp, "do not disturb" sign, etc.—and hold a corresponding location in each version, which allows for a side-by-side comparison of the subtly changing tones.

A 1995 trip to the Grand Canyon yielded four monochromatic, fiery reddish-orange works in ink on paper: Finch's "view" of the canyon as seen through his closed eyelids, the intensity of the sun becoming more apparent in the afternoon, as the capillaries in his eyelids gave a marbling effect. A pastel grid of six Rothkoesque squares of the same year is equally compelling, even if its subject is far less grand: Finch tried his own hand at synesthesia by translating into gradations of misty color the odors of Brooklyn's fetid Gowanus Canal that wafted through his studio windows on a hot summer day. The canal has never looked, or smelled, so good.

At Mass MoCA, disparate works produced throughout his career are grouped in two rooms according to color, or lack thereof: all white in one, all black in the other, as if in homage to Robert Ryman and Kazimir Malevich. A series of black pastel circles depicts the darkness inside the caves

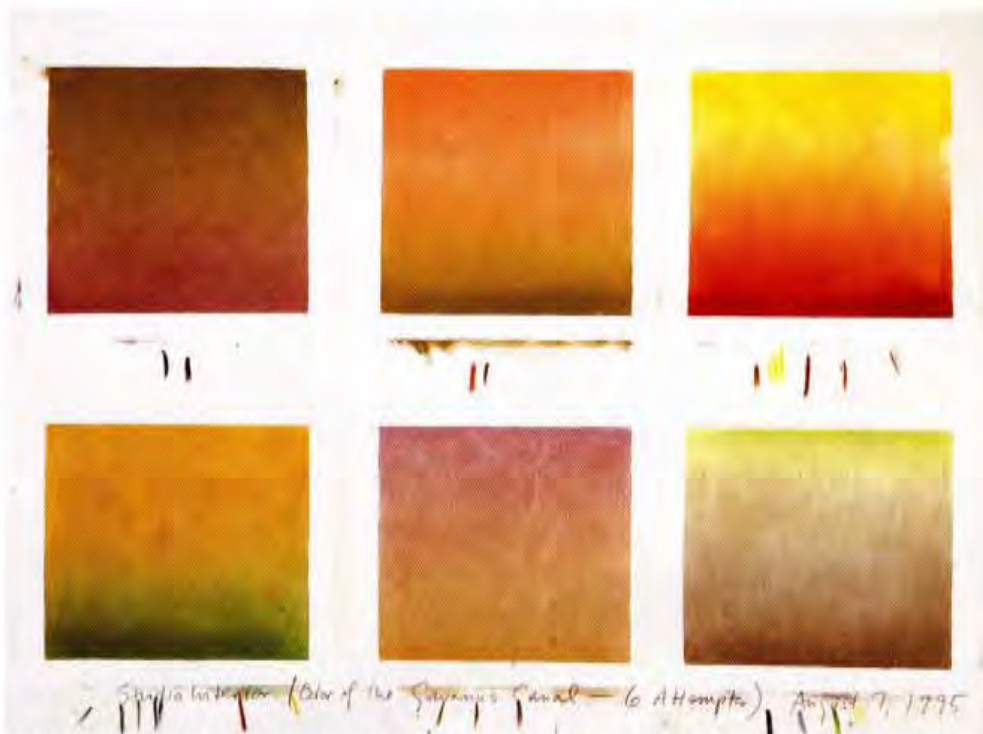
at Lascaux, the circles' fuzzy edges the result of Finch's blending the pigment with his fingers, perhaps a reference to the prehistoric artist's implement of choice. An irregular grid of 27 black squares represents a calendar month in which Finch, turning the lights on and off, made studies of the tones of darkness in different locations in his studio. Like a punch-in time clock, gaps in the grid indicate the days he was traveling or not in his studio.

While the black works are somewhat believable as the representation of darkness, the white works often make one feel like the emperor's gullible subject. For example, if you look really hard at various works you *might* see the trace of nine melted snowflakes on the paper's surface, or the extremely subtle tinge of "fog" as seen from the top of the enshrouded Empire State Building, or notice a tiny mark that depicts a bit of debris floating in Finch's eye as he made this "self-portrait." Overtones of Rauschenberg can be found in a work of (somewhat more visible) erased camouflage, and of the pirate Long John Silver in a buried-treasure map rendered in invisible ink.

In a group of 10 watercolor drawings made in 2004 installed in another gallery, each white and with a colorful abstract doodle at one edge, Finch teased the physical boundary of peripheral vision. Looking at the center of each sheet and holding a photo of a butterfly at the outer limit of his peripheral vision, Finch painted the butterflies exactly as they appeared to him. Collectively titled *Peripheral Error (After Moritake)*, for a haiku by the 16th-century Japanese poet, each drawing is subtitled for the species of butterfly depicted.

As with much concept-based photography, the production quality of Finch's photo-based works sometimes feels slight, which is perhaps appropriate considering that he struggles with its perceived role as a medium that ostensibly captures "truth." A grid of 48 snapshots of Loch Ness, allegedly proving the nonexistence of the monster, who failed to make an appearance during Finch's visit, looks like the work of an amateur shutterbug. More promising is *Rainbow (Brooklyn)*, 2002, a pair of

In a grid of Rothkoesque squares, Finch translated into gradations of misty color the odors of Brooklyn's fetid Gowanus Canal.



Studio Interior (Odor of the Gowanus Canal—Six Attempts), August 7, 1995, 1995, pastel on paper, 21½ by 29½ inches overall. Collection Jonathan and Betsy Stapleton.

otherwise unimpressive photos with text displayed on either side of the show's entrance. Having spotted a rainbow several years prior while on an elevated subway, Finch later estimated the rainbow's "endpoints" and photographed, in black-and-white, those bleak Brooklyn street locations, the rainbow and its pots of gold long gone.

It's when he uses photography in unconventional ways that viewers know they're in Finchland. On view in the room of black works is the large rectangular *Untitled (Tower of Babel)*, 1995, which is actually a shallow box containing an exposed but unprocessed sheet of photo paper bearing a latent image of Pieter Brueghel's 16th-century painting. As with Piero Manzoni's cans of *Artist's Shit* (1961), we can never confirm the subject's existence without destroying the work.

Performed for the sixth time since 1993, *Self-portrait as Crazy Horse* involved Finch standing all day in front of a gallery wall coated with photoreactive chemicals as sunlight exposed the area around him. His ghostly silhouette is barely discernible in the washy blue emulsion—streaked as a result of water being poured on the wall to fix the exposure—as if his soul were indeed captured by the photographic process so feared by the Oglala Sioux chief and various native populations.

In Finch's works that re-create atmospheric light conditions—usually arrangements of fluorescent light tubes or window installations—while the choice of colors is determined by the particular temperature of light, his arrangement of the colors is esthetically considered. It's not always clear what position the viewer is supposed to take: a few feet from the light source or across the room, staring at the lights or facing away? So again,



Poke in the Eye (right eye, outside edge, light pressure), 1997, watercolor on paper, 15 by 30 inches.

A 2004 work dominating the main gallery re-creates the sunlight in Emily Dickinson's garden as a cloud passed overhead.



Foreground, Blue (One second brainwave transmitted to the star Rigel), 1993, transmitter, antenna, TV set, computer, armchair; through doorway, Eos (Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02), 2007, 69 fluorescent fixtures and lamps with filters, approx. 3 by 17 feet; at Mass MoCA.



Composition in Red and Green, 2000, apples, carpet, motor, wood and acrylic tubing, dimensions variable.

Finch's attempts to exactly duplicate a sensory phenomenon are thwarted by subjectivity and circumstance, even when gauged with his trusty colorimeter.

In one of the show's site-specific works, *CIE 529/418 (candlelight)*,⁵ for which Finch installed yellow, pink, red, orange, blue and green glass in a gallery's windows, visitors are bathed in a flattering golden glow. Most accurate on a sunny day in mid-afternoon, the work fills the room with a warm light that is based on his colorimeter's measurement of candlelight, 8 inches from the flame. Another work, originally a room-size ceiling installation at Postmasters and reconfigured

as a smaller wall piece for this show, *Eos (Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02)*, like many of Finch's light works, evokes the light tubes of Dan Flavin, though, as in this piece, Finch's are often grouped together and striped with different colored gels. Finch measured the light, as the title indicates, on the site of the ancient city of Troy, at the Homeric hour of "rosy-fingered dawn," Eos being the Greek goddess of dawn.

Dickinson's influence is evident in a 2004 work dominating the survey's largest gallery, *Sunlight in an Empty Room (Passing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 28, 2004)*. On a visit to the home of the poet, who often made references to the sun, sky and light, Finch recorded the ambient sunlight while standing in the garden as clouds passed overhead. He then created a semi-literal reference by amassing a "cloud" of crumpled gels, mostly blue but dappled with violet and gray, which is suspended in front of a bright "sky" of two rows of fluorescent lights. To fully engage the somewhat interactive work, viewers must walk around the cloud to experience the approximate transition from sunlight to shade that Finch did, though the speed and frequency of the passing clouds remain unknown.

The earthbound *Composition in Red and Green* (2000) is a Finch experiment that can't fail, except mechanically. Demonstrating the law of gravity by way of Sir Isaac Newton, who formulated his theory after observing an apple fall from a tree, the piece consists of a suspended chute of apples that is supposed to create the titular work by dropping a red fruit every five minutes onto fake green turf. The several times I've seen this work, however, it has been beset by mechanical problems, though I'm told it's quite the crowd pleaser. In Massachusetts, pigs at a nearby farm get to enjoy its by-product.

The show's catalogue deserves special mention, not only because of the explanatory captions and insightful essays by Cross and art historian Suzanne Hudson but because it contains four artist's projects, including a nearly imperceptible yellowish *Sun Stain* (2007) at the center of a thick insert of paper, the result of being exposed to the sun for an entire day on Finch's roof; and, the coolest in concept and conclusion, a treasure map. *Buried Treasure (One ounce of gold bullion in North Adams, MA)*, seemingly a solid black square of paper, is a folded-up map covered with a special disappearing ink that momentarily lightens when rubbed or heated to reveal Finch's handwritten coordinates and a map of where to find the treasure, worth about \$800. In this case, a 10-year-old child found the gold the day after the opening, beating out several rivals who dug in the wrong place. Three similar pieces in invisible ink on white paper (not in the catalogue), including the one on view in the white room, were undertaken during Finch's 2003 residency at Artpace in San Antonio. Their treasures remain buried in three Texas counties, their secrets hidden in the drawings, executed in lemon juice, which turns brown when heated. To find the gold means destroying the (more valuable) drawings. As with Finch's work in general, the reward is to be found in looking. □

1. E-mail from the artist, Oct. 8, 2007.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Nabokov's memoir was first published in 1951 as *Conclusive Evidence*, and revised and republished in 1966 as *Speak, Memory*. His descriptions are themselves subjective and open to interpretation, such as "m" being the fold in pink flannel, "soft g" appearing as a rich rubbery tone, and "h" a drab shoelace. Among other subjects Nabokov studied are light, reflection, color, dreams, butterflies and rainbows, all themes that recur in Finch's works.

4. See *Art in America*, October 1995, pp. 125-26.

5. CIE stands for the Commission Internationale de l'éclairage (International Commission on Illumination), which in 1931 established the system for measuring the color of light based on wavelengths perceived by the human eye. Finch's colorimeter uses the CIE standard, and 529/418 refers to the specific reading of candlelight.

"Spencer Finch: What Time Is It on the Sun?" is on view at Mass MoCA, North Adams, through Mar. 31, 2008. It is accompanied by a 192-page catalogue with contributions by Susan Cross, Suzanne Hudson and Daniel Birnbaum, as well as four artist's projects. "A Certain Slant of Light" appeared at Postmasters, New York, Mar. 24-Apr. 21, 2007. A 700-pane window installation, The River that Flows Both Ways, the first public-art commission for New York's High Line, is scheduled for completion next fall.