

The Artist Who Manufactured Dawn

By Blake Gopnik

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Workers at Bloomberg LP, the financial-media giant, are settling into their new headquarters, a few doors over from Bloomingdale's. Officially complete as of last week, the offices are so fancy they even have a spiral escalator. In the basement, a vast expanse of curving wall, lavishly tiled in lemon-yellow glass, is there simply to hide the bathrooms.

But the building's most impressive feature is probably the long, straight wall that faces those yellow tiles. It is almost too bright to take in: a bank of 165 thin fluorescent tubes, installed horizontally from about hip height to shoulder level, stretches 100 feet. Once their eyes adapt to the glare, Bloombergers will see that each four-foot tube is wrapped in a skin of pastel plastic: The first 18 inches or so of each tube are the palest blue, then there's about the same stretch of limpid green, then diminishing spans of violet, pink, orange and yellow.

The wall label beside the installation should explain what's going on. This is a work of art by someone called Spencer Finch, and its title is "Sunrise (Over the Atlantic Ocean, September 6, 2004)."

But that explanation won't make the art's effect less strange.

When viewers look straight at the wall, they get an eyeful of glowing color, like a blaring light sculpture by Dan Flavin. Looking down at themselves, however, or over at the face of a co-worker, they'll realize the garish wall in fact emits a soft light that's subtly white. Skin is lit by a soothing glow that seems more natural than wired.

That white light wafting over basement-dwellers is the radiance of dawn, barely tinged by the green of the salt sea and the blue-gray of the lightening sky, along maybe with hints of violet and pink cloud lit by a yellow rising sun. The artist simply sought out a Long Island sky precisely at sunrise, took a color-meter reading of that lightest shade of pale, then used fluorescent tubes and colored filters to transplant it to a hallway in New York. It's one of several major works that New York's Public Art Fund was commissioned by Bloomberg to install in its new offices, as part of the company's commitment to cutting-edge contemporary art.

"Is it possible to make something powerful in itself, but that also points back to the world?" That's the question Finch keeps coming back to when he talks with a visitor to his Brooklyn studio. Can a work of art be both abstract and representational? Sensual as well as conceptual?

If all art strikes a balance between visual effect and thought, Spencer Finch is standing in the middle of the seesaw, one foot balanced on each side, praying not to fall.

Finch is a slight 42-year-old, with a feathery crop of short blond hair that's thinning on top. His eyes are a pale, watery blue, and they tend to look away as he explains himself, rather shyly, to a stranger. He's dressed in worn khakis and Adidas (but not the trendy ones that scenesters wear). An old white T-shirt reveals surprisingly well-muscled arms: They hint at time spent at the gym, and are the only sign of an artist's narcissism in a man who might otherwise be almost any kind of junior academic.

His mother, now retired, was once a teacher; his father still does research in chemistry. Until a very recent, rather modest uptick in art sales, Finch mostly fed himself by editing social studies textbooks. He says he's keeping a foot in that door as backup, in case his budding art career never fully blooms.

The last few years have brought some hints of recognition. Finch was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. He's also been picked up as a collaborator by acclaimed choreographer William Forsythe. On April 21 in Frankfurt, fluorescent pieces by Finch will grace the stage when Forsythe launches his new German company. The collaboration got coverage in April's Artforum, the most prestigious publication in contemporary art -- but so did lots of other stuff. For now, Finch is still smack in the middle of a pack that's been known to eat artists like him alive.

Finch's studio is suitably modest, and shares its owner's scholastic air: There's a fair amount of mess, but it's not notably arty. Work tables have as many scribbled notes and plans on them as clearly artistic works in progress. One wall features a trial version of some of the Bloomberg tubes -- which could as easily point to some kind of pending patent as to the birth of major art.

In front of those lights, blue helium balloons float in midair. It looks as if Finch has prepared a party for his visitor, but it turns out to be a test for another recent piece, first shown at an art fair in Miami in December. Finch's New York gallery, called Postmasters, had rented a "booth" that was in fact a shipping container plunked down on the beach. Finch's piece consisted of a cloud of 150 blue balloons that he set floating over it, carefully worked up to match the color of the noon sky above Coney Island. (Finch controlled his color's saturation by inflating all his balloons to precisely 9 inches across; he got the tint just right by blowing up a dark-purple balloon inside each bright-blue one.) It was as though a piece of sky from old New York had sailed south and moored in Florida.

It was also, as Finch insists, a pure impressionist effect of colored dots, like a tiny patch out of a Monet landscape.

Like the impressionists, with their half-absorbed ideas about color

and vision, he's interested in the "struggle between science and subjectivity," between what we perceive and how we feel about it. It makes his work "poetic" in the full, rich meaning of that overused term: not overwrought and underthought, but rigorous and probing in its encounter with reality.

In his most recent show at Postmasters, where he's been on the roster for a decade, there was a suite of lovely watercolors. Large sheets of thick rag paper were left almost completely blank, except for a single brightly colored blotch in a top corner. And each of those blotches represented a valiant attempt at reproducing the effect of a gorgeous butterfly seen at the far edge of the artist's peripheral vision.

The attempt happened to be futile: The only thing that could truly reproduce the effect of a butterfly seen out of the corner of your eye is . . . another butterfly seen out of the corner of your eye. Looking straight at a fuzzy patch of painted color is another thing altogether. But that really doesn't matter. What matters is the effort to translate a real-life visual experience into artistic terms -- just as a poem takes the world and puts it into words that try to hint, at least, at the original, even as they know they'll mostly fail.

"The fallen blossom flies back to its branch; a butterfly" -- that tiny poem by 16th-century master Arakida Moritake, inventor of haiku, was Finch's inspiration for making his piece about perception and its limits.

Finch has made several extended visits to Japan, including a junior year abroad spent in Kyoto, on leave from Hamilton College in Upstate New York. Learning the rudiments of Japanese pottery was the first mature expression of his artistic inclinations, and he followed up on it when he returned.

With a BA in comparative literature from Hamilton under his belt, Finch signed up for graduate studies in ceramics at the venerable

Rhode Island School of Design. But he says his radical, and radically leftist, ideas about what ceramic art could be got him kicked out of the program. He was re-admitted to the school's sculpture department, which had more patience for peculiarity. Finch's graduate exhibition consisted of renting out his allocated space to the Monet jewelry company, for a display of its "tacky costume jewelry" that spoke about beauty, and its commodification, and the art world as a counting house.

In the 15 years since then, Finch and his practice have softened a good bit. He's even happy to learn the kinds of traditional skills involved in painting watercolor butterflies ("that's become a pleasure again," he says). But there's always toughness lurking at the heart of what Finch makes.

One of his most impressive recent works, "Sunlight in an Empty Room (Passing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 28, 2004)," was inspired by a poem by Dickinson, the ultimate combiner of the soft and tough. Once again, Finch's art began with light and color readings, but this time taken in the back yard of Dickinson's home. He measured the light in both noonday sun and in the shadow cast by a passing cloud, and set out to reproduce those two effects -- just as Dickinson herself might have felt them -- for visitors to his New York gallery.

After much hair-pulling -- and much brainstorming with Forsythe, who's planning to build a dance around a similar Finch piece -- the artist came up with an elegant solution. In the middle of the room, he suspended a mass of blue theatrical gels, crumpled and assembled into a passable "cloud" about 15 feet across. And on the wall behind it, he hung a bank of 100 bare fluorescents tweaked to give a full-sun effect.

Stand in front of the lights, and you're the young Emily at her most cheery, reveling in "as much of noon as I could take

/Between my finite eyes," as her poem says. Pass to the other side of Finch's "cloud," and the blues set in: You're in the shade alongside the cautious, introspective, older Emily, who let her soul alone look out "Where other creatures put their eyes, / Incautious of the sun."

Either way, Finch has complied with the request that launches a Dickinson poem he doesn't cite: "Make me a picture of the sun," she asks. "So I can hang it in my room -- And make believe I'm getting warm."

Finch's "Sunrise," left, and its reflection in a curved tile wall at an office building in New York. Translating real-life visual experience into artistic terms: For "Sky Over Coney Island," Finch inflated balloons that matched the color of the noon sky above the New York amusement park -- and exhibited them in Florida. With "Sunlight in an Empty Room," Finch reproduced light and color readings at the Amherst, Mass., home of poet Emily Dickinson. Finch in his Brooklyn studio with the light fixtures that will be part of an installation.

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